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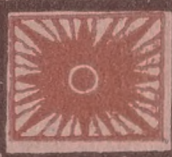
BY

M. BETHAM-EDWARDS.



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“DISARMED!”

A NOVEL.

Alfreda Barbara
BY M. BETHAM-EDWARDS,

AUTHOR OF “KITTY,” “HOLIDAYS IN EASTERN FRANCE,” “DR. JACOB,” “EXCHANGE NO ROBBERY,” ETC.

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“DISARMED.”

CHAPTER I.

I COULD never understand why a man should be contemptuously spoken of as living by his wits. 'Tis surely the most charming compliment in the world. For the eking out existence on five thousand a year requires no uncommon parts. To saw, plane, or dig potatoes is within the narrowest capacity also. But to come into the world unencumbered with earthly goods, as a bird or a butterfly, to make the day's invention suffice for the day's needs! Here is a phenomenon that strikes the slowest imagination.

Can we conceive the heaviness of the world without the engaging souls who, as the saying goes, live by their wits? From Homer to Harlequin, from Michael Angelo to Mountebank, the wit of the few alleviates the dullness of the many. Knowledge does not always gladden, philanthropy drives us mad. The contriver of happy surprises saves society from universal suicide. Begrudge not, then, thy sixpence to your poor Saltinbanque, O fellow-groaner under the burdens of life! If he ease thee not of a leaden hour, he is sure to do such a service for neighbors in worse plight than thyself. Give him sixpence, ay, a shilling, cheerfully, and bless him into the bargain, for he also is a benefactor of humanity!

The blazing logs of a handsome fire lit up the winter twilight; silver tea service, vermilion hangings, and every other brilliant object in the room glowing with light and warmth, as one of four lazy loungers thus questioned another: “Arthur, what would you have done had you been born dull?”

The young lady never so much as lifted her eyes to the speaker, but continued to turn over the pages of her illustrated paper, dimpled wrist and fair hand, on which sparkled diamonds, showing to as much advantage as if the leaves were turned for no other purpose. Then lazily and inoffensively, with eyes still bent on the page, she answered the

question by putting another: "What have you done all your life?" Then came a malicious little laugh from the depths of one easy-chair, an interjection of reproof from the other, but the first speaker rose from his seat, and stood glaring at the offender.

"You are growing intolerable," he said. "But since you call me dull, I will be dull to you, and to your cost."

"Oh dear! don't, Mr. Valerian," began a timid feminine voice. "Arthura did not mean it."

"Now, Colley," cried the occupant of the chair opposite, "I forbid you to interfere. If Arthura and Valerian did not hate each other they would be as dull as you and I."

The first little old lady sank back in her chair, breathing a sigh of resignation. The second leaned forward, all alertness. The pair between them presented also a striking contrast, the girl quiet, even languid, the man evidently irritated past endurance.

"Such ingratitude it has never been my lot to punish, for punish you I will. Turn no more of your dull people over to me." Arthura only smiled. "The fact is you are fast being spoiled. But your task from to-day will be to make bricks without straw. No appeal shall induce me to have pity on you."

Arthura laughed. "You should not put such questions. I can not help it if I do really find you dull sometimes."

"Do not say that, dear Arthura," again remonstrated Mademoiselle Colette; but she was straightway silenced by her formidable hostess.

"It is your book-learning, perhaps," the girl went on, in the quietest manner. "Nothing but books, books, books, from morning till night. I should grow into a dullard too if I read as many."

"You might be more of a scollard with advantage," retorted the other. "It is surely as well to know the three R's. Don't, however, look to me any more to instruct your ignorance. Find some one else to teach you what every housemaid ought to know." Thus saying, the irate speaker dashed out of the room, Arthura's provoking little laugh reaching him on the threshold.

"What a question to ask! Yet it sets one thinking," she said, looking in the fire. "Why are so many people dull, I wonder? I suppose it is the curse of sin, the old Adam in us. And what should I have done had I been thus afflicted? A blind man gets a dog to lead him; a cripple can buy a wooden

leg; trumpets supply ears. But what shop could I go to for a parcel of wit? And a spry beggar is worth a golden fool, and a farthing's worth of wit fair change for fifty pound, says the proverb."

"Does the proverb really say so?" asked Colette. "But why did you not say this to Mr. Valerian? It would have amused him. It would have put him in a good temper."

"Let Mr. Valerian be," answered Arthura. "He tries to crush me with his learning. But I am his match with the tongue."

"Don't quarrel—pray don't quarrel. Try to see his best side," pleaded the little Frenchwoman.

"Will you always be a child?" broke in the mistress of the house. "My dear good Colley, if Arthura and Valerian try to crush each other, where's the harm? Leave the rivals alone."

"Why should they be rivals?" asked Colette, with a tone of pain.

"Why should they not be cherubim? That is as rational a question. But now upstairs for the business of dressing! Be sure to look in and give me a finishing touch, Arthura. Benson knows no more how to dress me than if she had been lady-in-waiting to a savage with only shell fringes for wardrobe."

The three ladies rose, Arthura soon to appear in her patroness's tiring-chamber well dressed enough for a handsome girl of twenty-three, even had she been an heiress instead of an underling.

"Are you going to wear all these?" she asked, glancing at the dressing-table with unabashed girlish amusement. It glittered with gold and jewelry, and from her seat before the mirror their withered owner contemplated the treasure, smiling an odd smile of satisfaction.

"Now, Arthura, the truth. Is it worth while for an old woman like me to trick herself out with rubies and pearls?"

Arthura was curiously turning over the first ornaments that came to hand. Dazzling indeed was the display! Amethyst contrasted with topaz—the violet and the crocus; chrysolite, glowworm among gems; opals for pensive loveliness, and rubies for rosy lips and smiles; the modest yet bewitching sapphire, azure of heaven's own; pearls for the princesses born, and diamonds for nature's duchesses, with heaps of gold and silver beaten into beautiful shapes, broken sun-rays, rippling moonlight—all were here, and the girl contemplated

them with the unenvying eye of youth content to be itself. Thus questioned, she looked straight at the speaker, then at the reflection of the small shrunken face opposite.

"No," was the prompt answer. "If I were sitting before the glass as you are now, and looking at myself, I should say it is not worth while. But seated at the head of the dinner-table, and seeing everybody staring, not at me, but at my diamonds, I should say, Yes, it is worth while."

Miss Hermitage laughed that worldly little laugh so full of character. "I knew I should get no beating about the bush from you, Miss Speak-your-mind. Then I am bound to be-fool myself because jewels impress people?"

"And amuse them."

"You are right. It is our duty to amuse people. What is amusement but another name for happiness?" Miss Hermitage said. "Why was I unhappy in my youth? Because I never got any amusement. Why am I as happy now as the day is long, though but a withered old woman? Because I am amused."

"Then we will wear as many jewels as we can carry, and never mind the preposterous figure we make," Arthura said, culling one or two trinkets of unusual size and splendor. "We will wear this, and this, and this," she added, adjusting circlet and star, clasp and aigrette.

"You are a perpetual riddle to me, Arthura. I do believe you are the only person in the house not afraid of me."

"Why should I be afraid of you, or any one? You can only send me away. I do not wish to go. But I must be unconcerned and outspoken sometimes. Well, yes, preposterous was too plain a word to use; yet I am sure, at my age and in my place, you would have had it in your mind."

"Never mind the word. One thing is certain, I hear all your sharp speeches. You can say nothing harder of me out of hearing."

"These diamonds set off your velvet gown mightily," Arthura said, paying no heed to the last remark. "Yes, after all, age, not youth, is the time for jewels. They fascinate people's eyes, and turn their attention from deficiencies. They do the sparkling we can not do for ourselves. One, just one more ornament, dearest Gossip. This diamond spray in your head-dress, and just one more, this dewdrop—it is nothing more—to glisten under your chin."

"As you please, Miss Impertinent. That was not a stupid

question Valerian put to you. What would have become of you had you been born dull? We had been talking of it just before, Colette and I, and saying how lucky it is that you can earn so much, and with all your incumbrances and responsibilities too. But now every one is dying to get you: I mean my old cousin, Mr. Constantine, and my young cousin, Stephana—the countess, as we should call her."

"I love Mr. Constantine, and the Countess Stephana bewitches me. But you are a good mistress; I will stay with you till you turn me away."

"I shall not turn you away," was the good-natured reply. "That is to say, so long as you amuse me. I must be amused."

"We will amuse you," Arthura said, gayly. "It would be hard indeed if we could not amuse ourselves when money drops from the trees like ripe apples."

"Money does not seem to have much to do with it. Who so gaysome as yourself?"

"I think people are like flints," Arthura made quick reply, with that piquant gravity as natural to her as exuberant mirth; "you must crush them to make the sparks fly."

"My dear Arthura, who has crushed you? Your father had a sweet temper, you say, although he was a sad— But never mind. And your step-mother is as harmless as a pet tortoise."

"Oh! I was not thinking of human beings, but circumstances. I am the luckiest person in the world; still"—here the young face clouded—"what if I should fall ill, should die, my father's debts unpaid, my little brother and sister uneducated, my step-mother helpless as a baby?"

"Well, you are not in the least likely to die just yet; so let us go down-stairs and enjoy ourselves. You answer for it that no one will be bored. The opening night of a season is critical."

But Arthura only laughed away these misgivings. Always gayest after a pensive thought, to-night she seemed irresistible. Crushed or no, the sparks flew in all directions.

On the threshold of the dining-room, just as she had opened the door for Miss Hermitage, she saw Valerian coming out of his study. Closing the door after her mistress, without shutting it, she awaited him just to say, with extraordinary hauteur:

"You may be as dull as you please, Mr. Valerian, but incivility before Miss Hermitage's guests is quite another mat-

ter. You remember the conditions on which you hired me into her service."

He bowed, even more frigid than herself. "I hope I know my duties as host without having to come to you for instruction," he said.

Then he opened the door, and Colette, looking tremblingly from one to the other, saw that they had at least made up their minds to a show of courtesy.

CHAPTER II.

FLIRTATION is of every age, and Miss Hermitage, who had been starved at seventeen, could eat and be filled at seventy. Do not ice-men relish pomegranates close under the pole-star, and foggy Londoners delight in roses at Christmas-tide? The ineffable pastime of coquetry has no season, and may be indulged in when wigs are set as a snare instead of sunny curls or locks Hyperion, and we smile adoringly with lips parted showing ivory not our own. Miss Hermitage was now amused in right good earnest. There were bright-eyed maidens and sumptuous matrons in her salon, a fair company arrayed with the respect due to the richest hostess in the place. One acknowledged beauty and one finished coquette were there, of course; what assemblage was ever without? But alike lovely dimples and queenly figures, arch smiles and eyes irresistible, were neglected for the oldest and least lovely woman present. The irony of the situation pleased Miss Hermitage. There she sat, like a young and beautiful queen on her throne, one knight holding her fan, another her bouquet, a third protecting her complexion from the fire by a hand-screen, a fourth seated obsequiously at her feet. These clerical henchmen, however, would not on the morrow make merry at their hostess's expense. A rich old maid is a Golconda, a river flowing over golden sands, to curates. Miss Hermitage was safe from fairer rivals in these hearts, beating calmly, strangers to passion. She accepted the chivalrous homage now paid to her, whether lay or clerical, smiling inwardly. The irony of it! In girlhood neglected, in middle life forlorn, in old age fêted, flattered, befooled!

The dazzling evening had reached its acme, when two figures brought a new and romantic element into play. In a certain degree outward uniformity and commonplaceness

must stamp every company in which the men and women are dressed precisely after the same fashion. Here, without any surprise being intended, came one of those happy surprises alone enough to enliven the dullest fellowship.

Among the latest to do homage to their new sovereign was a small spare figure of oddest yet imposing appearance. He was so old that his dress, which for the most part belonged to the last century, well became him. Nor were his manners wholly of this. Ceremonious, courtly, fastidious, he went through his social observances with a mixture of airiness and solemnity that accorded with his costume—scrupulously fitting black silk hose, black knee-breeches, and long-lapped coat of silky black cloth, and on his bosom ruffles of finest lawn, on which sparkled a diamond star. Diamonds also adorned his shoe-buckles. But engaging as was his general appearance, the fine, delicate features of the old cavalier attracted still more attention. Carved ivory was not finer, more delicate, than this small, rare physiognomy, nor the smoothest vellum of more harmonious texture than his beardless cheek. He wore no wig to hide the baldness of a beautifully shaped head, and his carriage was erect as that of a soldier. This dainty apparition now stood before the lady of the house, kissing her hand, and bowing low, as if in the presence of majesty itself. The little knot of admirers made way, and Mr. Constantine sat down beside Miss Hermitage.

“Praise me, cousin,” he began; “I have risen from my bed—I was going to say my grave—to pay my respects to you. Pray be congratulated. A brilliant assemblage, and superbly entertained. Whilst as regards your own appearance, it is faultless.”

He bowed low to the diamonds. Miss Hermitage laughed.

“It all amuses me. Why should it not?”

“Why not, indeed? I see with pleasure, too, that the old family plate is at last called into requisition, for I confess that I stopped on my way to invigorate my old frame with a sip of your excellent Madeira. The gold and silver service, the crystal, the exotics—everything matches to a nicety.”

“I have not lifted a finger. Valerian and Arthura arranged everything.”

“Ah, that incomparable creature with the legendary name! She ministered to my wants, and flitted about me so charmingly just now that I fairly lost my head.”

“You are welcome to lose your head, Constantine, but I

can not lose Arthura. I divine your covert meaning, Jesuit that you are! But the girl is worth half my fortune to me."

"You are too rich, Christina; you have an admirable steward in your second cousin—nephew, I should say—"

"Valerian and I call each other cousins; I will be nobody's aunt," Miss Hermitage said, tartly. "It is a venerable title, and not to my taste."

"I ask pardon. Then there is that ingenuous little French-woman, the dear creature I heard playing so divinely just now—you have her."

"I could no more do without Colette than I could do without the other two. We have known each other for fifty years."

"Oh, misnamed Christina! You will not, then, spare me one out of the matchless three?"

"Cleverness is to be had for money. Go to the right market and bid for it, as I have done."

"Cleverness, yes. But wit, sprightliness, Arthura's bewitching audacity! Where can I find such a paragon? Well, go your ways. When I am laid—it may be to-morrow—in my narrow bed, you will repent. 'Poor Constantine,' you will say, 'if I had only humored him!'"

"Indeed I shall never think of you in your narrow bed. What good would it do?"

"Take me to your bosom now, then," he said, playfully. "Make my few remaining days happy. I would go the length of marrying you, cousin—on my soul I would—for the sake of being cheered by that pretty, pretty thing."

"I am much obliged to you. I will go to the length of saying that you may come and see me as often as you please for the sake of Arthura's society," Miss Hermitage said, with extreme good nature. "But here comes Stephana!—Constantine and Stephana! Will the stars fall next? I am indeed honored."

"I will offer my respects to our kinswoman later; your Madeira tempts me once more down-stairs." So saying, Mr. Constantine, doing reverence to his hostess after the stately fashion of several reigns ago, made way for the second apparition in Miss Hermitage's crowded reception-rooms. For the pale, pensive lady, almost unearthly-looking in her sadness, was also phenomenal in her dress. There were scores of white dresses in the room; not one in the least like the white robe of Stephana. Other women wore pearls; her pearls seemed a part of her, and in her whole appearance, from the white flower shining in her dark hair and on her

bosom to the diaphanous drapery floating about her like a cloud, was something shadowy, spirit-like, almost ghost-like, if a fair breathing creature can be compared to a ghost.

“My dear Stephana! I am glad to see that you have not quite given up this wicked world; and we are to be neighbors.”

Stephana sat down, holding her cousin’s hand, and fixing her large, brown, penetrating eyes upon her.

“I am glad also. Then your travels are over?”

“Yes; I shall never travel in foreign parts any more, unless to Paris. In ten years I have seen every place I wanted to see. I intend now to settle down and amuse myself for the rest of my life. I am the richest woman in the country, and I mean to get the utmost entertainment possible out of my money.”

The large mesmerizing eyes of Stephana were still fastened on Miss Hermitage.

“Such large-hearted hospitality is much needed here. You will do real good,” she added, gently.

“Now, Stephana, please do not talk to me about doing good. I do my charities handsomely to ease my conscience, and there the matter ends. I am always interested to see you, my dear, but the very word philanthropy drives me mad.”

Stephana smiled away the other’s asperity, and changed the subject. “Were you happy in Italy, on the Nile, in Dresden?” she asked.

“I was amused, if that is what you mean. Valerian and Colette managed everything beautifully for me. I never had a dull moment.”

“And I am sure you can never be dull now. That charming Arthura who came with your message, I fell in love with her at once. It is just the nature that does me good to come in contact with.”

“Quite useless for any one to fall in love with Arthura,” Miss Hermitage said, unwarrantably emphatic. “She is necessary to me, and nothing in the world shall induce me to part with her.”

“You are happy indeed to find Arthuras,” Stephana answered, resignedly.

Miss Hermitage dropped her voice almost to a whisper. “You need not be lonely. Marry again. But now let us confabulate no longer. I am beholden to show myself—you also, as one of the house.”

The pair rose, and Miss Hermitage passing her arm within

that of her tall and beautiful conductress, went from one room to another. She had her especial reasons for looking after Valerian and Arthura. "Mind," she had whispered to her steward, "be civil to Arthura before our guests. She would be quite useless to me unless treated exactly on the same footing as yourself. The first person that flouts her shall be struck off my visiting-list." She saw now with infinite satisfaction that after setting conversation agoing in the large salon, Valerian was making much of Arthura among the young people. Colette, always gay and initiative where music was concerned, had improvised a carpet dance. There was Valerian leading Arthura through the labyrinths of a cotillion, certainly without a smile on his face, yet cordial enough for the occasion. The dance over, he was introducing her to a partner here, a stately chaperon there, Arthura smiling graciously. "A wonderful piece of acting! Who would suppose that they hated each other?" Miss Hermitage mused. She was well pleased with both as she continued her survey. Apparently without any effort they had made the evening full of pretty surprises, of which the impromptu ball was but one.

CHAPTER III.

MEANTIME Mr. Constantine and Stephana, finding a quiet corner behind the camellias and the crystal, talked easily. "Welcome home, sweet Mystic!" said the old cavalier, lifting her hand to his lips. "We have come hither, Christina and I, because we could find no pleasanter place to die in. But what brings you from Italy, from the world?"

"Say rather to the world," Stephana said, glancing at the crowded rooms beyond. "Well, who can give any reason for going anywhere who has no reason for going to one place more than another? But one motive I had in coming here. It was to be near the only kinsfolk I have in the world."

"Say you love me the best of the three, Stephana."

"You have always been kindness itself to me," said Stephana, by way of answer.

"I have been kind to everybody, my dear," Mr. Constantine replied, dropping his voice. "You are a married woman; I may say anything to you. I have not shone in the domestic moralities, but I have never been morose. I have done good-natured things."

"And now you want praise for being kind and virtuous too? But, as you know, I expect more of people; I insist on a soul."

"Only come and see me often—cheer my solitude, dear Santa Teresa—and I warrant you the soul shall be found. I am too lonely."

Stephana's eyes moistened with tenderness as she laid one hand on her companion's arm. "I will come as often as you please, Cousin Constantine, and bring that naïve Arthura with me. We will amuse you."

"Ah! that is what I want—a little genuine amusement. I know—I feel that you can mesmerize people with those eyes of yours. Force Christina to give up Arthura to me. My cup would then overflow."

Just then Valerian appeared, with Arthura on his arm. The tête-à-tête was broken. Arthura, taken possession of by Mr. Constantine, was delighting him with her mirthful sallies. Valerian dropped into a chair by Stephana's side, and chatted after the friendly fashion of a kinsman. "I am sure we have all done the very best thing in coming to this place," he began. "The sea is the only bribe for living in England, and we are here so near London that we can run up for an hour. Our cousin is enchanted with all my arrangements."

"You have a genius for making life agreeable," smiled Stephana.

"I may without flattery say that I have. But I hope, my lady cousin, that you find no difficulty in enjoying your own handsome fortune?" asked Valerian, much as if he were inquiring after her health.

"I certainly enjoy it as well as I have any right to do."

"Oh, if you go to the root of the matter, you will never enjoy anything," Valerian said. "You must let me teach you a little of my philosophy."

"Rather of the world, worldly, I fear," Stephana made reply.

"Can any true philosophy be otherwise?" laughed Valerian. "We are of the world; we must live in it—although I believe you do hold intercourse with finer spirits."

Stephana would fain have checked the playful speech, under which, she knew, lurked a certain grave meaning.

"Why reluct at the beautiful imputation?" he began. "Were you not in Rome exactly a year ago?"

Stephana bowed her head assentingly.

"And were you not obliged to flee like an outlaw because

of these gifts, spiritual, supernatural—call them what you will?"

Stephana held her peace.

Valerian laughed lightly.

"A little bird whispered in my ear that you feared the enviable fame thus acquired might bind you to Rome forever, keep you a perpetual prisoner there like the Pope. But not a syllable more, since it displeases you. Take my arm, and let me introduce you to some of our guests, one also like yourself from Rome."

The last sentence was carelessly uttered and carelessly listened to; then Valerian made way with his companion toward the music-room. What could be going on there? Piano and violin were hushed; alike dance and song were over; yet the doorway was thronged with hungry listeners, and the air breathed expectation. "Listen," Valerian whispered. "It is our Roman friend, the blind improvisator. You knew him; you must have heard of his wonderful story-telling?"

The pair stood still, and the narrator began. Was he using rhyme or prose? His listeners hardly knew. They were only conscious of a marvelous voice—music itself—that held them spell-bound, and of a sad, sensitive face that seemed to see, though only inner light could now irradiate it. Talk not of the cheerfulness of the blind. What deep, pathetic pensiveness is stamped—must be stamped—on the brow of the sightless!

"Just a year ago, then," began Valerian's guest, "all the world—I mean the world of Rome—was horror-stricken by one of those problematic crimes, that happen once in a generation, as if to teach us the irony of human justice. It was a fratricide, under circumstances so strange that whilst in men's minds the real murderer was convicted past doubt, the evidence of the law fastened the crime upon another. Never, humanly speaking, could anything be clearer than that here the innocent was about to suffer in the place of the guilty. Never was a stronger case made out by the lawyers.

"The eldest of three rich brothers is foully murdered, and the deed could only have been committed by one of the survivors, both having equal pecuniary interest in the death. But by which? By him of stainless reputation, austere morality, the devout churchman and lavish almsgiver, the wearer of civic honors well earned? Or by the graceless spendthrift, his younger brother, the hero of a thousand disreputable adventures, the wild wooer of every pretty girl in Rome, the

frequenter of taverns and casinos? Now it so happened, although I can not go into details, that, putting aside such damning testimony, circumstantial evidence pointed out the younger brother as the doer of the deed, whilst public opinion leaned the other way. As far, indeed, as outward circumstances could go, the culprit was doomed before he appeared at the bar of justice, nor did anything come to light during the trial to shake the tremendous, the crushing conclusions against him; yet the popular judgment never swerved; the elder and not the younger brother was the guilty man; the reputed saint, not the sinner, here had earned the curse of Cain.

"Meantime the unhappy prisoner was condemned to die, and as the day of doom drew near a painful tension held people's minds. No one dared openly to avow his thoughts, and accuse a man whom the law held unassailable, for the elder brother had been released after the preliminary and extrajudicial inquiry. But none acquiesced in the verdict. It was well known, moreover, that no confession within the prison had been made, a palmary proof of innocence in the popular estimation. Yet what could be done? The case had been tried after the usual fashion. The prisoner had been defended by able counsel. From such a sentence there was no appeal. So the fatal day drew near, and on the eve of the execution it seemed as if nothing short of a miracle could avert the catastrophe of the morrow. Just fifteen hours of life yet remained to the victim, when something happened so wholly unprecedented and extraordinary that but for a witness here to bear out my statements I should not ask you to give me credence.

"At five o'clock in the afternoon, therefore, an English lady, a young widow long resident in Rome, was entreated to give secret audience to a priest, a stranger to her, whose very name even she now heard for the first time. Being, however, allied by marriage with an old Italian family, of Catholic persuasion of course, she readily consented, seeing nothing unusual in the request. It was some every-day demand on her sympathies and well-filled English purse, nothing more. The stranger proved to be no homely country priest come to beg a little charity. Instead she saw a polished, affable man of the world, whose authoritative speech and bearing bespoke ecclesiastical rank. 'I am not—I could not be mistaken,' he said, perusing her with extraordinary earnestness. 'Yes, rumor and popular belief have not erred. You, if any living

creature, can rescue a guiltless head from the scaffold, the soul of another from everlasting perdition.' The lady looked up in deep amazement. 'There is not a moment to lose,' he said, 'and surely there is no need for explanation. You must be aware of the power you possess over your fellow-beings, that strange influence with which some are endowed, we know, for some Heaven-sent purpose. No flattering! Now is the moment to exercise it on behalf of two unhappy men, one burdened with disavowed crime, the other doomed to expiate it, although guiltless.'

"The lady was silent. He had spoken the truth, and she dared not shrink from the mission confided to her. Yet it was an awful one. No wonder that she turned cold and pale.

"'I have a carriage at the door. Call your tire-woman at once, and make ready to go with me,' said the priest. 'Although I believe that you are an alien from the one true Church, you can not refuse its mandate in such a cause. Two lives at stake, the one brief and uncertain, the other eternal.'

"He then explained to her how the belief had got abroad of her occult powers; the merest rumor at first, it had gained such force and consistency that nothing but an appeal to her would satisfy people's minds. She and she alone could lift the veil from a guilty soul. In her hands the granite of the real culprit would become as water or a blade of grass.

"'Of course,' whispered the abbé, as they left the house together, 'we must be circumspect. We must resort to stratagem. The unfortunate man now awaiting sentence of death is, in the eye of the law, the fratricide. The man you have to kneel to as an intercessor is presumably innocent of blood-guiltiness. We have secured an interview for an English lady on a mission of charity; your pretext may be to beg as a last favor from his brother that he will take leave of him in prison. The rest—'

"They now stopped at the great man's door, and no living soul will probably ever know what passed between the pair. Was there some talismanic charm in the lady's eye potent to subdue evil and make it obsequious to her will? Or did she use wizardry of speech that we know not of, laying bare the black soul with the lightning flash of a word? All is mystery. But when, pale as a ghost, she re-entered the carriage, her companion read at a glance what was past utterance. That evening the news had spread through Rome like a conflagration: the murderer had avowed his crime; the

falsely accused was set free. But the lady whose strange powers—”

The story-teller suddenly broke down, as if thrilled and set a-tremble with the potency of his own words. He bent his head forward in a listening attitude, stretched out both hands as one trying to reach something. Then he said, slowly and wonderingly :

“I feel it—I know it—she is here. Her unspeakable errand let none ask. Where all is good, all is mysterious.”

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT easier than to snap one's fingers at laggard Time, and flout all the demons of dullness that be, when our purse has no bottom? Money, certes, can not turn the loon into a paragon, but its miraculous powers stop there. It can draw out life to those who love it. It can flog the slow hours into a rushing pace.

Talk not to me, then, of the immorality of squandering. What were we sent into the world for but to amuse ourselves? What were others sent into the world for but to amuse? Let those sophisticate who may about moral obligation and Christian duty. We bid them pack, and in amusing ourselves do good all round without any trouble.

This was very much Miss Hermitage's creed, had she cared to put it into words; but she might have pleaded by way of excuse that she must make up in a few years for the dullness of a lifetime. She was old, and her chance of amusement had not come till the freshness of feeling was over. “Better late than never,” she had said, when coming into fortune and freedom at sixty. “I am a miser's daughter, nathless, I am sure of it, some spendthrift's heir! How the pleasure of spending tingles through my very veins! And I will be warned by my father's example. At least if nobody mourns, nobody shall rejoice, when I die.”

She was resolute, then, to spend, to make merry, and thus, as far as might be, compensate for the blank monotony of years. If repression had dwarfed her sympathies, it had not dulled her intellect. Above all, it had not shorn her of one natural endowment. She had the wit to enjoy. “I have a frame of iron. If I contrive to get twenty years of satis-

faction out of my life I shall have no reason to grumble," she mused.

Certainly she never did grumble. A girl just awakened to the consciousness of beauty and its power could not exuberate more than Miss Hermitage over her sound, healthy, unflagging appetite for enjoyment.

What, indeed, missed she but youth and love? Beauties pleased her, but the sight of happy lovers drove her mad. Was it envy? Was it regret? She wist not; she only indulged the feeling. If youth and love, however, are not to be bought for money, most other commodities come into the market, and Miss Hermitage could outbid her neighbors' bows. Whilst the lazy world waits for its pleasure, how little does it divine what pleasure costs! Miss Hermitage might have fitted out armaments, bought Peruvian cargasons, conquered a heathen people, with the specie put into her steward's hands for the purpose of making time fly. Valerian's busy brain and many another worked night and day on the problem, although, of course, no effort must be apparent. If the perfection of art is to conceal art, it is surely so with this crowning achievement, this rare piece of ingenuity, this almost superhuman victory over mortal dullness. Valerian's brain must work, and Colette's and Arthura's, from morning till night, in order to keep this complex machinery agoing. If the one failed of an expedient, straightway the others were called upon to furnish theirs. The riddle must be read by somebody. But as yet all there had shown themselves equal to the task. The day dawned, and Miss Hermitage woke up like some cradled princessling, sure of being dawdled and prattled to and showed the pretties till bed-time should come round again. "It is wonderful how diverting life is," she often thought; "I am sure I do not mind if I live to be a hundred." She had not even a dim perception of the truth. It never struck her that this light and airy fabric of existence cost as much labor as the building of a Pyramid. What was the cost to her? She could pay.

So, like a feminine Al-Raschid, she had her own poets dashing off *jeux d'esprit*, playwrights in her hire devising drawing-room comedy, prime donne exercising trills for her especial benefit. And there were conjurers in her pay, and sedulous stage milliners plying needles for her masquerades, and in far-off quarters of the globe fabulously lovely cats and priceless toy dogs were being educated, talking birds taught epigrams, floral paragons made to grow, whilst, to come down

from wonder-land to sober reality, how many pallid artificers sweated by gas-light, how many miners toiled like gnomes in the under-world, how many brown sailors put to sea, imperiling life and limb!—and all for what? To drive away one old woman’s ennui!

“Really it is quite astonishing how Valerian and Arthura understand their business,” was Miss Hermitage’s remark, soon after that opening soirée. “Time is flying so fast I shall soon have to find fault with them for doing their work too well. I shall be a hundred in no time at this rate.”

The secret of Valerian’s success was simple enough; but has not a great poet taught us that “*Doch ist das Leichte schwer*”? Just as a wise cook never serves up precisely the same dish to the company that has once pronounced it perfect, so Valerian never repeated a triumph; and if a Soyer or a Francatelli can ransack earth, air, and water in search of gastronomic emotion, how much vaster are the resources of the intellectual purveyor! Never had such bills of fare been imagined, much less heard of, as those now placed before Miss Hermitage’s guests. Commonness was banished; uniformity knew not its own. The wand of ineptitude was broken, and sparkling novelty reigned in its place.

Moreover, the little circle itself was a daily surprise and a mystery. Who were they all—this audacious, piquant Arthura? this authoritative, universal Valerian? the dream-like, beautiful Stephana, of whom report whispered so strangely? No one knew more of the group than that Miss Hermitage had lately inherited a princely fortune, and that her cousin, Mr. Constantine, had spent one; that Valerian was related to both, though in what degree nobody could tell; finally, that Stephana was really cousin twice removed of the first two, and widow, after two months’ wedlock, of a titled foreigner. Curiosity was most alert concerning Stephana—a human variety in this nineteenth-century sea-side resort, or in any other. A seer, now folks called her, and now one of the *Illuminati*. “A spirit, and a woman too,” she was, without doubt, but the spirit predominated over the woman, and that was not of the earth, earthy. Marvelous gifts were hers, they said—unwonted influence for good over her fellows, superhuman insight into things unseen, mysterious kinship with those ineffable souls that have revealed hidden truth to men.

Let it not be for a moment supposed that even the vulgar-minded categorized Stephana among those self-called inter-

preters of the unseen world by common means and for the gratification of abject curiosity. From such charlatanry she held aloof, moving serenely in a light all the more dazzling to others because they knew not whence it came.

Miss Hermitage made light of her kinswoman's reputation, except as a factor in the sum total of amusement. Stephana excited conjecture, she diverted, she was therefore "worth any money" to one who valued nothing but diversion, and measured all things by one rate of exchange. "Of course Stephana will cost me something, will get charity out of me," mused Miss Hermitage; "all diversions do. But what else is money good for?"

When Arthura playfully called her patroness by the familiar name of Gossip, she was but using her veritable patronymic. All four, indeed—Miss Hermitage, Stephana before her marriage, Mr. Constantine, and Valerian—styled themselves Gossip-Hermitage, the last name having been appended on the death of a kinswoman whose fortune had gone to the Gossip family, and with it her cognomen. Mr. Constantine, however, partly because he was one of several brothers, and partly because the name (like Steppie Sadgrove's) seemed to cling to him of its own accord, the son of a diplomate, and born at Constantinople, was becomingly called after the city and its founder; his early youth, too, had been spent in the East, and he ever kept up connection with a country of which he was inordinately fond.

Mr. Constantine was cousin-german to Christina and Stephana's father; and Stephana herself having three years before exchanged her two English names for an Italian one, her real style and title was Countess Cardonna; but when at the end of six unhappy months she was left a widow, she disclaimed what seemed to her affectation, and insisted on being called plain Mrs. Cardonna. English by birth, English at heart, determined to spend her life in England, why should she affect an empty title of nobility? Mr. Constantine had long ago spent the best part of a handsome fortune in philanthropy, but his cousin and second cousin were rich. What would they do with their money? This problem interested the old man not a little. He had indeed followed them to the South in order to solve it. Next to the pleasure of spending your own fortune, thought Mr. Constantine, is that of watching another spend his, just as a whist-player watches a game in which he takes no part.

CHAPTER V.

A PICNIC under greenwood shade is a stale contrivance, but surely Valerian was the first to entertain his friends in Nature's own garden white with hoar-frost. But let no one shiver at the notion. What knows opulence of zone and zone? The rich can carry the climate they like best with them wherever they go, and Miss Hermitage and her friends, in well-warmed carriages, furred and feathered up to the chin, could afford to call January delicious. How effeminate to stay indoors huddled over a fire, when you can be every whit as warm out-of-doors, and exhilarated and amused to boot? So "It is the greatest possible mistake to make a fuss about English winters," Miss Hermitage said. "Could any one be warmer than we are?"

That she might well say as the well-appointed carriage sped along the shore, between glittering white town and azure sea, to-day hardly rippling into a wave. The little bay was flooded with sunshine. It caught the tawny sail of the fishing-boat far away, burnishing the sheer till it seemed made of gold. It warmed the smacks of the sea-faring men busy with their nets into hues of battered copper. A mosaic could hardly be more brilliant or purer in tone than this picture. Yet when the carriage climbed an inland road winding high above the sea it was surpassed by a scene phenomenal even in our fair Southern England. Not a breeze was stirring, and the mists of two days had cleared away, revealing Nature's handicraft, kept secret till all was ready. And what had the enchantress wrought so cunningly? Not the solemn array of snow, that is death-like and eerie, but the witchery of the hoar-frost, belonging to life and joy. In the dimness of dawn and haze every object is veiled in mystery; a glorious burst of sunshine reveals such enchantment as we only see once or twice in a lifetime. The whole natural world is arrayed in white samite and diamonds—a winter bride ready for espousals.

In the woodlands the statelier branches are weighed down with their glittering burden, but the tiniest spray best shows the magic, not a blade, not a panicle, without its tassels and fringes of crystal, its sparkles of jeweled light. Then the blue clear-swept sky above, and the blue pure sea beyond. It is as if we were suddenly lifted into some beautiful moony world free from gross elements. All is cold, ethereal, crystalline. The carriage had flanked the bay, and now stopped

at the head of a small winding combe, through which a foot-path led to shelving rocks overlooking the shore. In summer-time there is beauty enough and to spare here, and then not a mossy dell or ferny covert without the prattle of happy lovers. To-day, instead of greenery and wild flowers, all was pure, silvery, silent splendor, the dazzling flowerets of the frost making labyrinths everywhere, here and there letting in a peep of the deep winter sea.

Valerian gave Miss Hermitage his arm.

"It is very clever of you to find out such beautiful things," she said, delightedly; "and to manage even the weather. No muddy roads, no snow-storms. Surprise upon surprise. But what are you going to do with these good people?"

Valerian smiled rebuke as there emerged from the dry crisp alleys of shining white one guest after another: a bevy of pretty girls for grace, their vermilion-colored petticoats and crimson feathers brightening the scene, and half a dozen for wit, Stephana and the blind story-teller among these.

A bend of the path, and Valerian's little scheme revealed itself. Midway between the sea and the opening of the valley was a small restaurant, much resorted to in summer, but shut up in winter—to-day, however, alive with merry voices. A bright fire blazed on the hearth, curtains had been hung up, rugs laid down; the place was a picture of rustic elegance and comfort, whilst in the middle of the room stood a flower-decked table ready prepared for a savory feast. "How charming!" cried Miss Hermitage. "Well, really, I wonder, Valerian, what you will think of next? You are, indeed, worth any money."

Never was a more appetizing and animated little banquet. But the marvelous *entourage* would have moved even a dull company. It was like feasting in a palace of frosted silver under a sapphire dome. What a sight to be seen or missed! Yet the blind story-teller seemed somehow conscious of the beauty around him. The enthusiasm of the others was as a revelation to his inner eye, and when the light part of the banquet had come, he rose, leaned against the wall, and put everything into a fairy tale—the little lodge under the spangled glittering branches, the sea below, blue as malachite, flecked with many a white pinnace, the sea-birds flashing overhead. After the story the party dispersed to see the views, Arthura and Colette staying behind to pack up plate and crystal.

In the midst of this business Valerian came up. "I have to hurry you away," he said to Colette. "My cousin and

Stephana wish to return alone, but a seat is kept for you in the carriage. As for us two," he added, glancing at Arthura with mischief in his eyes, "we must get home on foot as best we can."

Arthura looked dark, but said nothing.

"The walk is charming. We shall quite enjoy ourselves," he went on, ironically.

"Oh," put in the little Frenchwoman, "I am sure you don't mind—do you, Arthura? You will be friends with Mr. Valerian, won't you?"

"Arthura is not bound to be my friend, but can not refuse my company," Valerian replied, still malicious. "I will send Brown for the baskets, and then fetch you," he added, smiling at the discomfited girl. Then giving the little Frenchwoman his arm, he set off for the carriage.

When, however, he came back, a few minutes later, a certain plumed hat and fur cloak he knew well no longer hung on the peg. Arthura had flown. It was evident that she would not have his escort at any price.

From the valley several ways led into the town. Which would Arthura take? He pondered for a minute, then reflecting that she most probably knew but one, set off in pursuit, keeping the high-road. And true enough he did overtake the sulky recalcitrant. Mademoiselle Colette, catching sight of the pair, sighed to herself.

"Always at daggers drawn! I do wish they would learn to tolerate each other!" she mused. "But it is all Christina's fault."

Meantime Stephana, finding Miss Hermitage in the best possible humor, was skillfully leading up to the theme uppermost in her mind.

"I have been thinking a good deal about Valerian since my return to England," she began. "How admirable he is in many respects! So prompt, practical, and good-natured."

"All that he is, and much more. In fact, he is quite indispensable to me," Miss Hermitage replied. "But why should you think about him?"

"Because he is a relation, and yet no relation. I feel that you and Constantine and myself are bound to make up to him for the wrong—shall we say—that society has done him."

"He has everything his heart can desire. Why should you two do anything for Valerian?"

"That is hardly a position," Stephana said, gently, "and a man should have that. Some kind of career, a future."

"He knows well enough that if he makes himself useful to me as long as I live, he will be pensioned. I never intend to enrich any one. But Valerian shall never want."

Stephana looked unconvinced. "He is of our blood; the last, maybe. He should marry. He should found a family."

Miss Hermitage laughed a little dry sarcastic laugh. "To listen to you one might suppose poor Valerian to be the son and heir of a lord. A nobody he is, a nobody he must remain. Unless"—here she laughed again—"unless you marry him yourself."

"Valerian is on my conscience, and I would make sacrifices to help him," Stephana said, with great seriousness, and taking no account of the last part of the sentence.

"Why should Valerian be on your conscience?"

"Is he not on yours, then, and on my cousin Constantine's?" Stephana asked, still very earnest. "A kinsman who should bear our name, yet has none. The sin of our blood is here."

"Well, you and I and Constantine, I am sure, are doing all that we can for Valerian; and the world does not concern itself with by-gones. He is better off than most people, after all that may be said," Miss Hermitage answered, comfortably.

For some time Stephana was silent. At last she said, in the same tone of subdued painful thought, "Christina, do you think Constantine could tell me Valerian's history from the beginning?"

"There could be no harm in asking him," was the curt reply. Then Miss Hermitage suddenly became good-natured and alert, and she changed the subject. "Mind and come to our dance, Stephana. Valerian and Arthura are getting up minuets and rigadoons to be danced in costume. It will be as good as a play."

CHAPTER VI.

The like of Valerian and his rigadoons had never been seen in those parts, and although in his latest achievement he was always said to have surpassed himself, here praise stopped short for want of a word.

What so like one fashionable masquerade as another?

But when at a signal from the master of the ceremonies the band sounded, and Mr. Constantine led Miss Hermitage, both in the costume of Queen Anne's time, through the rhythmical paces of a minuet, drawing-room etiquette was for once set at naught, and ringing applause filled the place. Youth and beauty felt themselves eclipsed. All eyes were fixed on the antique exquisite pair treading their measures so exactly, yet with such stateliness and dainty grace. Exquisite they both certainly were, and not only as far as dress was concerned. If Miss Hermitage wanted Mr. Constantine's perfect features and ivory complexion, there was still a likeness between them. The faultless build, the small stature, the correct carriage, were hers also, and Arthura had done the business of dressing so beautifully that there was no outward inferiority. As a picture Miss Hermitage could bear comparison with her cousin, but as a picture only. The sumptuous little old lady in hoop and brocade nicely matched her no less superb cavalier. The fire animating Mr. Constantine's physiognomy lacked in Miss Hermitage's. Two vessels were here fashioned after one mold, but from different materials, and whilst through the alabaster the pure flame burned bright, feebly by comparison glimmered the wick through the clay. It was, above all, the little performance that captivated the lookers-on. Handsome old ladies and gentlemen in antiquated costumes may be seen any day, but to see them do anything precisely as it would have been done in the days of our great-grandfathers is wholly another matter. Mr. Constantine had been one of the most finished dancers of his time. Miss Hermitage had never been taught any other accomplishment but the dance, and could go through her steps and courtesies to perfection. The pair, bowing and courtesying to each other when the minuet was over, afforded a piquant spectacle. For the life of them people could not help clapping their hands and shouting.

"Our last appearance in the world, most likely," said Mr. Constantine, as he led his companion to a chair. "The next new clothes we have to buy may be much simpler."

"Speak for yourself, if you please," retorted Miss Hermitage. "Though, if you had left me a legacy, and I wanted it, I should have to poison you. You look wiriness itself."

"Don't you really feel ghost-like sometimes?—as if you belonged to a world of shadows?" asked the other, playfully.

"Now, Constantine, if you make yourself disagreeable, you shall come to no more of my parties."

"My dear Christina, how many more do you expect to give?"

"You are older than I am, ten years at least," Miss Hermitage made tart reply.

"Well, let us not quarrel. I am longing for a glass of your well remembered Madeira. Will you bear me company to the buffet?"

"No; I am well pleased to sit still; you must go by yourself," was the reply; whereupon Mr. Constantine made a stately reverence and left her.

"How unpleasant Constantine is at times!" thought Miss Hermitage. "Like Stephana, always harping on disagreeable topics. I do believe life might be perfect without relatives. Yet Constantine and Stephana can be vastly entertaining when they choose. I could not do without them."

As she spoke her eye rested on the beautiful figure of Stephana, at that moment the cynosure of many eyes. She was sitting beside the blind story-teller, and, utterly unconscious of general admiration, was describing one gorgeous figure after another, as the dancers flashed by in dresses of the olden time. Now, strange although it may appear, the effect of Stephana's description on her blind companion soon became a much more vivid impression to the by-standers than the spectacle itself. The outward, visible pageant before them, so alert with life and movement, so aglow with color and richness, lost somewhat of its charm and reality, and all were bent upon the realization of the scene through the delicate poetic medium of a blind man's perceptions. Perhaps, indeed, none of us see things so vividly as those who behold them by the aid of memory or imagination only. Stephana but described the hues and lusters we may look on every day. Her listener saw with the inner eye something maybe of the splendor that irradiated the blind prophet of Patmos. And just as the crimsons, the purples, the gold and gems, now passing before him became a thousandfold more dazzling, thus exaggerated by a blind man's fancy, so the little crowd of listeners saw what their own eyes could never have revealed to them. Lukewarm appreciation was changed to deep æsthetic insight.

"I see it all," said the story-teller, breathing a sigh of enjoyment as the dance ended. "And now, dear lady, tell me what your own dress is like. Yet stay—I can divine. These sumptuous peacock splendors are not for you: only white, and not the white of snows and sea-foam; something pearly

and pensive ; and for jewels only pearls, or perhaps the melancholy opal. No flashes, no scintillations. Only your eyes, deep, dark, unutterable, to make a glory of the picture."

"You shall fancy what you please," said Stephana, smiling. "Now tell me what brought you from your beloved Italy?"

"Ah," he replied, "my answer is easy enough. But your own to the same question, which I have been tempted to put a dozen times? You had a mission in Italy. Sin and mystery claimed you."

"Are not sin and mystery everywhere?" asked Stephana.

"Hardly here," he made reply. "It seems to me that you have planted yourself in just the kind of world to make us forget their very existence. Since I came to this place I have breathed an air of perpetual light-hearted enjoyment. No need, surely, for a revealer of dark secrets, an apocalypse of doom and retribution, here."

Stephana smiled away the grave question. "But misery at least is to be found in every corner of the earth. You may perhaps hear of me as an evangelist among the fisher-folk? If I undertake to preach sermons for the good of my fellows, will you tell stories?"

"You have anticipated my reply to your first question," he said, quite seriously. "What else, indeed, can a blind man do? And why should not story-telling be a medium of spiritual instruction as well as the printer's block? Now I do not know if it has ever struck you, but it has long weighed upon my own mind, and painfully and imperiously—a conviction that must sooner or later take the shape of deed—how few, comparatively speaking, of even civilized human beings, realize the music there may be in the human voice. Most folks, at least English-speaking folks, hear once in their lives the music of the sea. Some sort of musical harmony, too, is brought to the door of the meanest. But the subtle spell that lies in a rare human voice, how seldom is that exercised on the souls of the masses!"

"And such a gift is indeed yours," answered Stephana, eagerly. "Not the gift alone; you have the spell to use it."

"So I believe," answered her companion, in a tone of deep humility. "A blind man, above all others, has constant need of fellowship and sympathy. In darkness none can live alone. I have put the question to myself, Might not story-telling become not only a medium of social intercourse, but absolutely a career, an avocation? Outside the pulpit, out-

side the tribune, what a field lies open for him who would move the souls of men by the magic of fastidious, impassioned, flawless speech! For the most part, to what dull, gross uses is put the human voice! Listen on the threshold of a tavern, a cottage parlor, any place in which average humanity is congregated together. The language is mean enough, but the manner is more deplorable still. Never once will you hear an exquisite word."

"A beautiful ambition!" replied Stephana. "And of course your stories will point a moral?"

"Was ever any story written by reasonable man or woman without a moral? Therefore, dearest lady, you will picture me and hear of me as a wanderer stopping wherever he can get a dozen folks to listen to him, or even one; for I shall not only accept invitations to frolicsome places, but to hospices, deathly silent but for the groan of pain, and to lonely chambers of poor sick men. Think of what a story may do for one blank day! Nor will sin fright me. Shall I not be as safe in the dens of vice as yourself? for I have heard of a certain angel that troubles the waters—" He broke off with a rapturous expression, and added, still using Italian, and speaking in under-tones: "Ah! If I might but be as that angel's attendant shadow!—ministrant I dare not say: to whom can a blind man minister? But if we could only go through the world hand in hand, you to speak to men's consciences, I to their hearts, what happiness would life still have in store for me!" And lower and lower still he dropped his voice: "Did you not know it? I could not stay behind. Italy was not Italy without you."

Before Stephana had time to reply, if indeed she intended to make any, Valerian came up petitioning for a story. Nothing else would now satisfy Miss Hermitage and her guests.

So, leaning against the mantel-piece, his tall, attenuated figure wearing almost a look of shadowy unsubstantiality, his pale rapt face riveted as it seemed on some spot from whence light should come, he looked as strange and out of place among these careless masqueraders as Stephana herself. It was, indeed, perhaps the contemplation of the narrator as much as the wild weird story he now told with such quiet insinuating eloquence that struck the fancy of his listeners.

When he ended there was a ringing shout of applause. Miss Hermitage went straight to her guest with bluntest thanks.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Marksham. Really what

a pity it is you are not some poor under-graduate in search of a livelihood! I would give you handsome wages, and you should tell me a story every day of my life."

CHAPTER VII.

"Ah, Arthura," said Miss Hermitage, when the flushed, triumphant girl came to her patroness's unrobing, "what should I do without you? Your comments on these evenings is the best part of them."

"Are they really?" Arthura asked. Then, as she took off one ornament after another from the gold brocade, she said, "Who got the most admiration to-night, you or I?"

Miss Hermitage laughed grimly. "What a question to ask! People admire you, my dear, because you are young and handsome, and me because I am a rich old woman they can get something out of."

"But it is all admiration, and foolish compliments may as well be paid to one's pocket as one's self. What difference can it make?" laughed Arthura, gayly.

"You are in extravagant spirits to-night. I am sure you have been quarreling with Valerian. You may try to crush him. You never will," Miss Hermitage said. "But quarrel as much as you please, so long as you do it amusingly."

"I do not want to crush any one," Arthura replied. "But if any one, why not Mr. Valerian?"

"Because he is a man and you are a woman. That is why."

Arthura laughed in merry scorn.

"If Mr. Valerian were not a man I could like him well enough."

"Well, we can not transform him into a parrot, like Judas. So you must put up with him as he is."

"Do tell me, my Gossip," said Arthura, "can you remember how you felt when you first fell in love!"

"What next, Miss Malapert? I wonder why it is that your impertinence never displeases me?"

"Is not impertinence common-sense, and common-sense Christian feeling?" asked the undaunted Arthura. "Why should I not treat you like a human being, just because you are rich and I am poor? I am sure, were you in my place, you would ask such a question."

"Why, you are not falling in love, are you?" asked Miss

Hermitage, glancing at the sparkling, animated apparition before her. "Be warned, Arthura. Falling in love would be ruin to your prospects."

Arthura but grew more and more gaysome. She actually stooped down and kissed the tip of Miss Hermitage's nose. Never before had she ventured on such a caress, but it was not taken amiss.

"Why should you throw yourself away on a curate, when I give you the pay of three? No, my dear, stay with me, and amuse me," Miss Hermitage said.

"But I can do that and fall in love too."

Then she threw herself playfully on her knees before her patroness, and asked in a tone of entreaty:

"A favor, a favor, or I stay here all night. May I go home to-morrow to get a peep at my darlings?"

"If Valerian makes no objection, certainly. What is the programme?"

"Expectation is the better half of enjoyment, as the spider said before swallowing the fly. Wait and see, dear mistress. But I am not wanted."

"I can hardly believe that. Still, if Valerian raises no objection, go and see your step-mother and the children by all means. But home early, remember."

"May I settle it all with Mr. Valerian?" asked the girl.

"Yes, settle it with Valerian," Miss Hermitage made answer. "Though what pleasure you can see in going to London for an hour or two this cold weather I can not conceive. But now tell me amusing things. What did people say and do worth repeating to-night?"

"If it were only possible to be as clever as some people are stupid! But I won't be ill-natured, except to the curates. And Mr. Barham—well, can you imagine what Mr. Barham said?"

But her listener had dozed off, and Arthura glided away, the tire-woman replacing her. Still radiant and wide-awake, she went down-stairs to look for Valerian. He had just lighted Mademoiselle Colette's candle, and the pair were bidding each other good-night when she entered the dining-room, bringing so much freshness and beauty with her that they could but look up admiringly. Yes, this dark-haired, dark-eyed Arthura, with her rich complexion and easily acquired sumptuousness of dress, was a picture worth looking at just then. She might indeed wear anything, and be in any mood.

But the dash of wild spirits no less than the gown, red as a cardinal's mantle, became her mightily.

She went straight up to Valerian, and dropping a courtesy, asked, with the prettiest house-maid's simper in the world,

"Please, sir, may I have a day out to-morrow?"

"What have you done to deserve it?" he asked, looking in the best possible humor also.

"You can spare me," she said, now herself again; "I am not wanted to-morrow. Do, Mr. Valerian, for once be amiable to me."

"Oh, be friends," interposed Colette. "I am sure you might like each other if you only tried. Do begin this very day. Let her go home, Mr. Valerian, and she will show her gratitude by being friendly to you ever after."

"I make no conditions," frowned Arthura. "The day's holiday is in the bond."

"Not any especial day," said Valerian, teasingly.

"I will have to-morrow or none," was the vindictive reply.

"Oh, dear Arthura—oh, Mr. Valerian—do not begin quarrelling! You were quite pleasant to each other this evening. I watched you."

"We must be civil before the world.—No, Arthura, it is inconvenient to me to spare you to-morrow. Ask me some other time."

"Never again," Arthura said, as she took up her candle sulkily and made for the door.

"Dear Mr. Valerian," put in Colette, "she looks terribly disappointed. Why not say yes? Stay, Arthura; I am sure he will say yes."

But Arthura vanished quickly as she had come.

"Let me go to her with the permission. She is young. She clings to her step brothers and sisters. Remember that this is not her home," pleaded the little Frenchwoman.

"Of course she can go," Valerian answered, with perfect good nature. "But it does me good to see that girl in a passion. She is really very handsome."

"One would think women were only made to be looked at from the way men talk of beauty. She has a heart of gold; that is really something worth mentioning. But good-night, Mr. Valerian. I will do anything that in me lies to fill her place to-morrow. I must now let the poor child have the happy news to sleep upon."

"Good-night, Mademoiselle Colette. Tell Arthura, no

more holidays for her unless she comes back in a tractable spirit. Henceforth all favors to depend on good behavior."

"Indeed I shall say no such thing. I will not aid and abet you in spoiling a generous temper. The sin be on your own head."

CHAPTER VIII.

ARTHURA lived in two worlds, divided only by an hour and a half of railway, yet unlike each other as remote antipodes. The place she greeted so rapturously next day was wholly sad and unlovely. Instead of tossing waves and exhilarating breezes, a white town glittering along the sea-marge, and resting on hills verdurous even in November, she saw a picture as sordid as may be. It was certainly not London in tatters, but London out at elbows—London shorn of its sable pomp, and shivering in the thin garments of poor gentility. This townling within a town was one of those numerous suburban colonies of poor people ashamed to be held poor. One street of ill-built little houses was precisely like its fellow. There were precocious little serving-maids cleaning windows, gardens in front narrow as hearth-rugs, clothes that would never dry hanging out at the back, and nothing in one window that you did not see in the next. Yet a fire blazed on every hearth, the cheap red curtains had a warm look, on every sill was a flower or bird-cage for grace. As Arthura tripped along the narrow street her step became buoyant, her cheek glowed with happy expectation as her heart leaped. She breathed the air of home.

"Arthura! my own Arthura!" cried a young voice from within. Straightway the door flew open, and a delicate-looking boy of eleven was almost throttling her with embraces, a girl two years younger was clutching her gown, the young mother followed, leading a third, and all was joyous commotion. "You should have written, Arthura," began her young step-mother, affectionately, but with a tone of melancholy reproach. "We have nothing fit to give you for dinner."

"My dear little Steppie"—her pet name for a step-mother little older than herself—"you must not bewail the dinner, but be merry. I could not tell you, because I did not know. I am to have a day's holiday once a month. Only think of that!" Then she kissed the little company over and over

again—Steppie, the boy Walter, Benjamine, and her three-year-old sister. "My own, own Arthura," cried Walter, clinging to her, gazing up into her face as if his very life were there. "Kiss me a thousand times, my Arthura."

Whilst Steppie very carefully and admiringly disrobed Arthura, putting away plumed hat, rich fur cloak, and silver-handled umbrella, little Benjamine's face presented an interesting study.

First with large eyes, pale blue as milk and water, she inspected the muff. Finding it absolutely and hopelessly empty, she sniffed gently round the cloak, lifting up the lap-pets, peering slyly into the pockets. Like the muff, they held nothing. Benjamine next glanced at the umbrella. No little parcel was fastened to it. She at last sadly and resignedly sat down by Arthura's side. "What beautiful things you wear now!" she said.

"It is my livery," Arthura answered, merrily. "Miss Hermitage's servants all wear livery—the men powdered wigs and artificial legs covered with silk stockings, the women furs and feathers."

"Arthura," Steppie cried, ready to shed tears of mortification, "how can you talk in that way to the poor children?"

"Would you have them believe that I like wearing a hundred pounds' worth of clothes whilst they are fitted out at the slop-shop?" Arthura asked, with almost brutal frankness.

"That reminds me," Steppie began—"I am very sorry. I always have something disagreeable to say when you come home. The children must have new shoes. I could not take them to church last Sunday because they were so badly shod."

Arthura took out her purse, and with unruffled spirits emptied its contents on the table. There were several pieces of gold, a number of shillings, and one sixpence. She picked up nothing but her railway ticket, and pushed the money toward her step-mother. "There, dear little mamma, I wish I had more to give you."

Benjamine crept up to her mother's side.

"May I have the sixpence for the doll you promised me?" she said.

"Yes," cried Arthura, overhearing the question. "And give Walter something, and Baby too. I was too delighted at the prospect of seeing you all to think of presents."

"I hope you are happy?" asked Steppie.

"As happy as I can be away from you. My notion of perfect happiness is to have nothing to do all day but lie here on the sofa with the children jumping over me, and little mamma feeding me with a spoon."

The children laughed immoderately.

"How amusing you always are!" sighed Steppie. "'Tis but a dull companion I am to the poor children. I could cry sometimes to think how dull I am."

"That is an odd way of trying to be livelier," laughed Arthura. "You should read some funny story that makes you laugh till the tears run down."

"Tell us such a story. Make mamma's tears run down," said Walter.

"No; when we have had dinner we will do something better than have stories. Wait and see," replied Arthura, looking mysterious.

It was soon one of the clock—dinner-time—and the little maid-of-all-work having laid the cloth, the party sat down.

"A wretched dinner for you," moaned Steppie. "Now had you come the day before yesterday, you would have dined off a hot joint."

The dinner was no worse than it generally is in households where means are straitened and gentility at a premium. But the savor of home was there. Arthura, with Walter by his side and the rest of her little family in sight, could have swallowed anything short of ogre's fare.

Grace said, and the cloth taken away, she sprang up joyfully. "Little mamma shall play to us, and we will dance," she said—"dance madly till we hear the muffin bell."

"Dancing and muffins! Each word conveyed to the children's minds the very apex of enjoyment. They knew not which to enjoy most—the delectation of the moment or the thought of the pleasure to come. Steppie, proud and happy to have her one accomplishment called into requisition, sat down to the piano. Arthura danced now with Walter, now with demure Benjamine, now with one-syllabled Baby. It was wonderful how much contentment Baby managed to express with her monosyllables. All were in frolicsome mood. Even Steppie declared that she was enjoying herself.

"At least, not enjoying *myself*: I can not say that I ever do that. But I am enjoying you, I suppose, Arthura."

The minutes flew by desperately. There was the muffin bell.

But although the muffin bell heralded tea, and tea Arthura's departure, all kept up their spirits till the last moment. How could they help it? First of all, Arthura, all tears, sighs, and depression, acted the woe-begone figure she should make entering Miss Hermitage's drawing-room. Then with inimitable mimicry she showed how, in the midst of her despondency, Miss Hermitage's pet parrot would shout, "Fetch the doctor!" changing her tears to laughter. Lastly, standing on the hearth-rug, she acted alternately the part of Colette vinaigrette in hand, offering consolation, and of herself utterly inconsolable, yet laughing between her sobs.

This comic scene sent the children into ecstasies, but no time for encores! only just enough to hurry on hats and cloaks and catch the train. Arthura did, however, find a moment before they set out to put her arms round her step-mother's neck and whisper,

"Of course, Steppie, as soon as papa's debts are paid, you shall be made much more comfortable."

Then they all started, prattling cheerfully as they made their way through the fog.

"Tell me," Steppie said, as the train came up. "Nobody is unkind? You are not snubbed and flouted?"

Arthura laughed merrily.

"You have never been to court, little mamma. Everybody is good to the court fool, the zany. I am as the apple of Miss Hermitage's eye."

Before Steppie had time to remonstrate, the train was off.

CHAPTER IX.

VALERIAN could gild refined gold and paint the lily in matters of enjoyment, but how to plant Miss Hermitage's bower with moly and amaranth, and shut out breaths from the cold dark under-world of Shades?

Do what he might, mortal reminders would come in the likeness of such winter ailments as flesh is heir to: the cough and catarrh inseparable from age as expectant next of kin. Through the very key-holes these warning whispers continued to make insinuating way, and curtains downier than starlings' nests failed to keep them out.

"I suppose, if Valerian can not keep me well in England, we must betake ourselves to the Riviera next winter," she

said to Mr. Constantine. "But I find England quite as amusing, and to folks of our generation it seems more natural to live in one's own country 'in spite of the climate.'"

"I do not think the climate of a certain other country we are fast bound for will trouble us much. Whether you will find it amusing or no, my poor Christina, I can not say."

"I am sure I do not ask you to say. You are welcome to think what you please, and to keep your thoughts a secret," retorted Miss Hermitage. "I sincerely hope, Constantine, when I am as old as you are, I shall be less disagreeable."

"Come, cousin, we won't quarrel. Tottering on the verge of the grave as we both are, we ought to love each other like turtle-doves. Still, I make use of the privilege of kinship to urge on you—"

"An odious privilege, too. Am I in my dotage? Can not I do as I will with my own? I know what you are driving at. What can it concern you how I dispose of my money?"

"Tush, tush, my dear Christina! You can not be angry with your old cousin. I can have none but disinterested motives in persuading you to make your will. It is your duty as a citizen."

"Well, have you made yours?" asked Miss Hermitage, brusquely.

"Upon my honor I have. But as I have nothing to leave, what does it matter?"

"Nothing to leave? What an old spendthrift! And your money has been squandered on no good objects—that I feel certain of," retorted Miss Hermitage.

Mr. Constantine looked more insinuating than ever.

"My dear Christina, you are not a child. You know something of the world and its ways. I may, then, blush for my follies in your presence. But it is not the model husbands and fathers that make the world better, remember. It is the good citizen, the man of public spirit. I have at least been a squanderer in good causes also."

"Well, is my squandering in bad causes?" asked Miss Hermitage. "I employ plenty of people. I encourage trade."

"Women were not taught political economy when you learned Shakspeare and the musical glasses," answered the other, with perfect good nature. "But you have the right to enjoy your money. The only point I feel it a duty, as your nearest relation and senior, to insist upon is this: you must know as well as I do that if you never make a will, poor

Valerian would not so much as get a quarter's allowance if it happened to be due."

So saying, Mr. Constantine rose and very significantly with his walking-stick traced on the carpet the family escutcheon bearing a Bar-Sinister.

Miss Hermitage was not to be moved.

"Then it would fall to Stephana to provide for him. She has plenty of money. She may marry Valerian if she chooses when I am gone."

"Oh! you do think you shall go, as you call it, some time or other?" laughed Mr. Constantine, lightly. "Don't be so superstitious as to suppose that the making of a will would hasten departure. I made mine, the first of many, fifty years ago."

"Much good it will do, if, as you say, you have nothing to leave."

"Well, one always has something. For instance, in my last codicil I bequeathed to you my dress suit, shoe-buckles and all. It will so pleasingly remind you of the heyday of age we are now spending together, these lover-like confabulations and almost amorous confidences."

"I am sure it is very handsome of you to leave me your old clothes! Now had you left me the family portraits in your possession I would not say no."

"Not too late!" cried Mr. Constantine, eagerly. "I will order a fresh codicil to be drawn up this very day—provided that you, by way of return, leave me five thousand a year!"

"You are absurdity itself. Ten years my senior, and asthmatic to boot!"

"Do oblige me, Christina. Supposing it should happen that I live to be a centenarian and you are prematurely cut off, how glad you would feel that you had smoothed my declining years!"

"If you have not enough to live upon, you are most welcome to anything you want. You know that well enough, Constantine. But I must go my own ways. I can not be interfered with."

"I always said you were an angel. I only want, alas! what you refuse to give me, your confidence, your affection. Well, I am off to Stephana. She never refuses me anything, and I will tell her that it is her duty to marry Valerian."

"I hope she will tell you that it is your duty to leave other people's marriages alone."

"And wills? Well, God bless you, my dear Christina. We part in peace, I hope?"

"You are not going off on a journey, are you?" asked Miss Hermitage.

"No, indeed," was the reply. "I could but think of yourself. The gruel basin, the hot posset, the slight—forgive me, Christina—the slight redness of the nose—all these things awaken anxiety when we are—well, no longer what we used to be."

"Come, Constantine, the luncheon-bell! You must really stay or go. Stay, I say, for Stephana's genius does not lie in the direction of eating and drinking."

Raillery and banter will, however, often do what argument fails to accomplish, and Colette's quick mind soon discovered that her friend and patroness was pondering. Something, the little Frenchwoman knew not what, had set her thinking. She entered airily as usual into the day's distractions, with recovered health recovering her spirits. But she had evidently a weight on her mind.

Now there was one person in the wide world from whom Miss Hermitage had no secrets, and that one person was Mademoiselle Colette. They had summered and wintered each other (to use a rustic phrase) for upward of fifty years. They had borne together the thralldom of youth, and in company had welcomed the deliverance that came with age. And, strange to say, materialism and self-indulgence of the one had never infected the other.

Colette, now an old woman, was all pure, unalloyed musicalness and sweetness, as when, an orphan girl of twenty, she had been received as companion to the miser's daughter. Did the pair love each other? Rather did Miss Hermitage love any one?—for Colette's warm heart embraced all the world.

Who can answer such a question? But if not affection, at least generosity or gratitude made the rich woman act a protector's part to the penniless one. Colette, to use her patroness's words, had everything she wanted. Confidence, like love, is accorded to those who do not go out of their way in search of it, and Colette during fifty years had never asked Miss Hermitage a personal question. She knew well enough that in due time she should learn her friend's most secret thought, and so it was now.

"Colly," said Miss Hermitage, one morning, "I am going to send Arthura and Valerian away to-morrow for a week.

The servants must go too, except Bates, who is so deaf that she would not hear a cannon-ball going off under her ear. Mr. Brown is coming.”

“I am very glad,” answered Colette, always on the side of right and kindness.

“Why you should be glad I can not conceive. What difference can it make to you?”

“I was thinking of Valerian,” said the little Frenchwoman, meekly.

“One would suppose, to hear you and Constantine talk of Valerian, that I had never done anything for him. He has as much as he deserves, I am sure.”

“So have we all; some of us perhaps more,” was the reply.

“You talk like a child, Colette. As if deserving had anything to do with the good or evil fortune that befalls us in this world. Nobody deserves anything. We just take our chance as people do with lottery tickets. Well, Mr. Brown is coming, so I hope you will now be satisfied.”

Nothing more was said, but next day by noon Miss Hermitage’s house wore a look of funeral gloom. The shutters of the ground-floor were closed, the blinds of the upper chambers were drawn. Not a sign of life was to be seen. Some careless passers-by supposed that Miss Hermitage had been very suddenly stricken down with mortal sickness. Others that she had lost her cousin Mr. Constantine. The world of acquaintance took it for granted that she was, as the phrase goes, “out of town.” No one surmised the true state of the case. Closeted with her faithful old friend and legal adviser Brown, Colette stationed outside the door lest even the deaf old woman-servant left in charge might peep through the key-hole, Miss Hermitage was at length making her will.

CHAPTER X.

NEVER spring-tide gave more seductive hints of sunshine holiday than on that April morning when Arthura and Valerian found themselves so unexpectedly and enchantingly cast adrift. How fair and pleasant looked the world! The zephyrs breathed softly from the south, the brilliant metallic sea was changed to gently ruffled azure, the fishing-barks, instead of battling for very life with fury of wind and waves,

glided lazily or lay at anchor, as if the sweet day would last forever.

And life was theirs for seven whole days. No more amusement to think of and to scheme, no more happy devices necessary daily, hourly, momentarily.

They could both be as dull as they pleased till twelve of the clock that day week. No wonder they breathed, not common air, but intoxicating ether, and hardly touched the ground as they went. Noisy as must any railway station be, perhaps it is the most exhilarating place in the universe. The very railway whistle has sweetest music in it, the bustle and turbulence intoxicate the senses. We are going somewhere; we are leaving somebody behind. Let us pardon our ancestors their bloody encounters, their savage pastimes. They had no railway to whirl them in a twinkling from routine and relations.

Arthura, a lackey beside her holding reticule and wraps, looked more like a queen than a young lady living, as the phrase goes, by her wits. A duchess might well have envied that erect carriage, that fine glow of spirit, that faultless set of the head, not to speak of eyes and brow.

Valerian came up, cold as ice, and automatic as if he too wore livery.

"There is your ticket," he said. "We must travel by sea-coast, as there is no other train for an hour. I go to the smoking carriage, so will say 'good-by,' and wish you a pleasant journey." Then having seen to the proper arrangement of her bagatelles, he took formal leave. In another minute the train moved off, slowly following the sea-line. The radiant girl looked out of the window, smiling to herself, laughing to herself for very joy. But for the absurdity of it she must have burst out singing. A week, a long unending week of home, of freedom! And Steppie and Walter and Benjamine? What a surprise in store for them! She saw already Walter's pale cheek crimson with delight at the news. His own Arthura! and for seven round days! Tears of exquisite expectation filled her eyes. She could no longer contain herself. She was fairly crying at last—crying from pure gladness of soul. When the train stopped for a minute, the door of her carriage opened, and Valerian jumped in. Without a word of apology he sat down. The cold ceremoniousness of a quarter of an hour before had vanished. The mask was thrown aside. Her lover stood bending over her, kissing away her tears.

"The joy! the surprise!" was all she could say, whilst she wept on, he smiling reproaches.

"Listen!" he said, flushed, trembling with haste and eagerness. "A wonderful idea has just flashed across my mind. You must not, you can not, say no. In the other end of the train is a protégée of Colette's, a French school-mistress, going back with her little girl to France. Let us go with them. Let us spend our holiday on the other side of the water."

All her doubts, misgivings, and hesitancy he read at a glance. Her pure, candid face opened to him as a book.

"I know this lady, Colette's friend, well. She would take care of you. If the adventure is discovered, no blame could be attached to either of us. But it will not be discovered. I will bind her over to secrecy. And you shall have your promised holiday in the summer to spend at home. That I promise—I guarantee."

Still *Arthura* wavered.

"Think of me," he urged. "I could but see you at your step-mother's. We have so much to say to each other, and here is an opportunity."

Arthura said never a word.

"Oh, we must go," he cried. "You need just such a distraction. And France! France! To be in France! Think of that!"

But *Arthura* could not think at all. The sudden sense of freedom, the relief at throwing aside the mask worn so many months, had quite overcome her. She only wanted a quiet place in which to weep happy tears.

"Then I decide for you," he said. "I not only decide, I take all the responsibility. We will go with this lady. You shall stay under her roof, and every day we will run about in the country together."

That notion of running about in the country with *Valerian* made *Arthura* smile through her tears. She let him do as he would, only begging to be left alone for the present—till they were on the boat, till they were in France, she said.

"Till we get back again?" smiled *Valerian*.

But he humored her, getting out at the next station, and *Arthura* had a priceless hour to herself. No one was by.

She could ease her too happy heart by tears, not the first, certes, of her young life, but the first—perhaps the last—shed out of pure unalloyed joy. Who ever wept twice for being too happy?

Then the train stopped, and there came the excitement of a first little sea-voyage. Arthura, placed between her new friends, looked around her with quick, eager eyes.

Nothing she saw now was ever forgotten: the strange sweet aspect of English landscape as it gradually faded from view; the pure waters through which the vessel moved like a living thing that knows its way; most of all the ships coming and going, the sea birds darting hither and thither. All was life and movement on what she had imagined to herself must be the solitary, silent ocean. Then as gradually dawned a beautiful old town built high on a green hill—no look of England here; church towers, house-tops, even shutters, had an outlandish appearance. The place seemed to smile a welcome, and gentle gales breathed from the lea-shore. Nearer and nearer they came till they were close under the bustling harbor and quaint town, both bright as in a picture.

The sailors on the quay shouted, using foreign speech, and military music could be heard from a neighboring square. A little convent bell tinkled sweetly in the suburbs.

At last the keel grazed the sand, and the travellers landed one by one under the waving tricolor.

They had set foot on the soil of happy France, the pleasant, pleasant land—land of liberty, of light-heartedness, and of love!

CHAPTER XI.

ALL as yet had seemed like a dream to Arthura, the sail, the landing, the long, long journey westward, then the arrival at the fair city, enthroned so stately on the Loire. It was morning when the train crawled slowly along the quays bristling with masts, and close under the shadows of the venerable cathedral, into the station. The sun was flashing on town and river, gilding the ancient palaces of merchant princes, burnishing dome and cupola, lending Venetian warmth and sumptuousness to the scene. And over all such a sky! Flawless, dazzling, southern blue. Were there never any clouds in France? asked the wondering Arthura.

She awoke to the reality of things when she found herself in Madame Henri's little parlor alone with Valerian—hostess and little daughter out marketing, the class-rooms closed on account of Easter holiday, half an hour certainly, perhaps an hour, all their own, before déjeuner.

"At last!" he said, and, perhaps pardonably, gathered her for a moment to his lips, his heart, his knee. "At last!" But it was for a moment only.

The next Arthura was standing beside his chair, not in the least ready to cry of joy now, but herself every inch, raillery as well as love looking out of her eyes, a thousand things besides sentiment on her lips.

"What will become of us?" she asked roguishly. "We are ruined. We are undone."

Quite pardonably, it must be admitted, Valerian would fain have had one kiss more, only the third after six months' waiting, he pleaded. But Arthura laughingly changed the subject.

"We are ruined," she repeated, looking artlessly, foolishly blissful over the prospect.

"Yes," he replied, shaking his head with a woe-begone look. "My poor little girl! ruin is just the word. Nothing could have turned out so deplorable for both of us as this business. It is, in fact, suicidal."

"I am as good as married already, for I have a family to support," began Arthura, with eyes brimful of hope and joy.

"And I have no prospects. I must stay with my cousin," said Valerian, looking equally radiant.

"I have my father's debts to pay." And for a moment Arthura's face clouded over. The next she was sparkling as before.

"I shall perhaps be my own master, and able to marry you, when I am sixty. Will you wait for me so long, my poor Arthura?"

Arthura laughed gayly.

"Shall I have done all that I must do by that time? Thirty years! thirty years! You would be sixty, I fifty-three. It seems a long time, yet with the children to educate and place out, not a day too much. It would be safer to say forty." And again she laughed merrily. "Would you love me for forty years?" she asked, and bending down as she stood behind his chair, he unconscious of the act, she just touched his brown curls with her lips.

"No, I can not promise. You are the cleverer at devices. Find some means of solving the problem."

"Oh, let us not think of the future to-day!" she cried, passionately. "Let us run about the woods and gather wild flowers like children. The problem can wait."

"For forty years? Well, give me one kiss, and I will promise anything you please?"

"Not to marry Stephana, then?" she asked, full of vivaciousness. "For that is what they have set their minds on, my poor boy—I mean Miss Hermitage and Mr. Constantine. Stephana is to marry you, and you are to become a grand personage."

"Nonsense!" he said, sharply and reproachfully. "Who could have put such an idea into your head?"

"Well, Stephana would not have you; that I am sure of," was the saucy reply.

"You do not know that either," Valerian said, distracted by Arthura's spirit and beauty, in almost a love-like frenzy at the notion that she loved him, was to belong to him, yet at the same time a little ruffled at her outspokenness and want of appreciation. And a second time the temptation was too great. She was more than bewitching, but she had hurt his vanity; a second time he took her lover-like in his arms as he put the question. "Tell me, was it but a mock quarrel, like the rest, for Miss Hermitage's diversion, or did you mean it? You once called me dull!"

"What people do in play they are apt to do in earnest. Let me tell you what is on my mind, for once, for all," she said, sitting beside him, at first neither sad nor merry, in every-day sober-colored mood. "My own Valerian," she began, "you must know how hard it has been to keep up this deception so long. When I first went to Miss Hermitage's I thought nothing could be easier than to pretend to dislike you, loving you all the while. And, besides, it was my bread and the poor childrens'." She dashed away a tear or two; then went on. "It was my father's honor. I could not refuse. But I have felt a dozen times as if I must go and tell Miss Hermitage all."

"You will not—promise me you will not?" asked Valerian, greatly disturbed.

"I have no right to betray you. Be easy," she said, raising her tear-wet face to his, kissing him as if he were a child, a weak thing dependent on her. "But if you will not release me from the bond, let me go." Again she turned to him, this time with passionate pleading—with love unutterable looking out of her pure eyes. "We should be able to see each other now and then. We could write to each other. I am sure we should both be much happier."

"Well," Valerian said, very kindly, even tenderly, "we

will turn the matter over in our minds. We will talk about it."

"I can not quarrel with you any more. The pretense of disliking you became unbearable sometimes," Arthura continued. "I really felt as if it must be true, or as if it would come true."

"And so you really meant it when you called me dull?"

"I dare say I did. I feel vicious enough to say anything sometimes."

"It does great credit to us that everybody has been so completely taken in," laughed Valerian.

"No; it is just that I feel ashamed of," Arthura said, rising to her feet, and a fine glow of indignation on her cheeks. "There must be nobility enough in Miss Hermitage to pardon us, if we go to her and reveal all."

"Never! never! You little know my cousin. You do not know her at all," cried Valerian. "Such a step would be ruin, sheer ruin for us both, my poor Arthura; and listen, my love, my wife that is to be. There can, of course, be no secrets between us. Sit down for a minute on my knee whilst I tell you something."

For a moment such a look of pain and forlornness came into her lover's face that Arthura could refuse him nothing. There was actually tears of mortification in his eyes.

"Listen, my little girl, my only friend," he whispered, as for a moment they sat thus cheek to cheek and hand to hand. "This poor Valerian you love so dearly has nothing, not even a name, to give you. I must keep down high spirit. I must be Miss Hermitage's bond-servant as long as she lives, since it is she who picked me out of the gutter."

Arthura, all gentleness, listened now, sitting close beside him, looking up at him with mute yet sweetest consolation.

"Is it any wonder that I show what may look like a craven spirit? But for Christina I should have shared the fate of thousands of forlorn wretches born into vagabondage, living witnesses of secret sin." He was absolutely in tears, this ready, volatile, light-hearted Valerian, as, still leaning his cheek to hers, he blurted out the rest. "You, my love, my wife to be, my one close friend, must know all. I am called by the name of my kinsfolk, but I am one of them on sufferance only. Is it not monstrous, shameful, that such things should be? But you will love me none the worse?"

For answer, the passionate girl put her arms proudly, protectively, about him. "What are you, what can you ever be

to me, but Valerian?" she said. "It need not prevent us from being happy."

"And if we have patience and tact, we may be happy ere we think," Valerian said. "But I must not go against Christina's wishes."

"And if she bids you do it, you will have to marry Stephana?" Arthura said, playfully.

"Leave Stephana alone," he replied, with a touch of irritation. "Stephana is generous enough for that. She little thinks that a little penniless girl bewitched me past cure long ago." He was recovering his spirits.

"Do you really think we shall be happy some day?" she asked. "Can things come right for us as they do in story-books?"

"It will not be my fault if they go wrong. But you must be guided by me in everything. Promise."

"That is vaguely said. Put in plain words what I am to promise you," said the happy girl, delighted to see her Valerian himself once more.

"Then promise me two things: you will stay with Christina as long as I wish it; and you will never, never breathe a word of our engagement to any living soul."

"We shall see," Arthura answered. "We shall reflect. What if Miss Hermitage should some day grow tired of me? I could not stay then."

"She will never grow tired of you whilst you amuse her, and you can continue to do that."

"Who knows? I amuse Miss Hermitage now without taking any trouble about it. Why it should be so I do not conceive. The least thing I say makes her smile. She must have lived all her life with people who only said Yes and No. I never say Yes and No, and that amuses her, I suppose."

"You must never begin to say Yes and No, then. Understand, my Arthura, if my cousin chose, she may make your fortune as well as mine. We are both in her hands completely;" and Valerian's face assumed its every-day, worldly look. "We must act our respective parts more discreetly, more circumspectly, than ever."

"Let Miss Hermitage make your fortune, and let me run away, then. One will suffice for us both," pleaded Arthura. "Were I no longer present, there need be no acting at all."

Valerian's brow grew dark.

"There is the bell, and I promised to answer it. It is

Madeleine and her mother back from market," she cried, jumping from her seat with a sense of relief.

True enough, it was their hostesses laden with marketings, flowers for grace, and a brilliant display for delectation. There were strawberries of the four seasons, crimson of crimsons; bananas barred with black and gold like a bumble-bee, the zebra'd banana, as some French writer aptly calls it; asparagus, wands of ivory tipped with pink; the tropical mad-apple, deepest shelly purple; the prickly artichoke, delicate sea-green, smooth as if carved out of marble for the crowning of a column. And there was butter, yellow as gold from the rich pasturage of Brittany, and ray-fish fresh from the Loire; galettes crisp and brown, fried a quarter of an hour ago by light-fingered itinerant pastry-cooks; bread of that glossy romantic brown never tasted out of France—and indeed what was there not for epicures?

The servant had been sent home for her holiday, so hosts and guests set to work—Madame Henri to make the omelette and cook the fish; Valerian to act the butler, which he did to perfection; the two girls to lay the cloth. What a merry breakfast it was! How the wine seemed to sparkle! How the least little thing invited mirth! There was only one drawback. In the midst of a lively conversation Madame Henri suddenly recollected the thousand francs spent on her daughter's English education. "Speak English," she cried in a shrill voice. "Speak English, I say."

"But, mamma, you will not understand."

"What does that matter? Speak English, I repeat."

So the rest of the talk was carried on in English, Madame Henri dumb, but delighted. What was Madeleine thinking of, forsooth? Two English guests, whose talk at meals was worth a dozen lessons at five francs apiece, did not drop from the clouds every day. And opportunities of putting money in our pockets must never be wasted, thought the Frenchwoman.

What would you have? If her heart was in her pocket, how many others are similarly located! Some people's hearts, alas! are in their palates, not a few feminine ones in their looking-glasses, a considerable number are not to be found anywhere, and few, very few, we may be sure, are in their right place.

Madame Henri was not to be blamed for seizing upon any small worldly advantage that came in her way. Had Shakespeare himself been sitting at her table, she would have fore-

gone the pleasure of listening to him for the sake of her daughter's English. We are what circumstances make us, and people who live by their wits must not be Quixotic, but look to actualities.

CHAPTER XII.

THE month of May!—the month of Marie! Valerian and Arthura had touched French soil just as pious maidens were heaping fresh flowers on the altars in honor of the Virgin, and now it was May indeed.

And what a May! June seemed to have come in her sister's place. The air was fragrant with magnolias in full bloom; camellias, red and white, made a blaze of splendor in the public gardens; people sunned themselves at their doors all day long.

Almost Southern voluptuousness comes with the summer to this imperial capital of Western France, so proudly confronting river and ocean. The city itself offers many enticements. There are the tropic alleys of the common pleasure-ground; the stately quays, where wave flags from the wide world; and, high above, terraced walks, whence you may survey the whole scene—city and cathedral; fair open country; and, studded with many an emerald islet, the superb, the swift-flowing, the unbridled Loire, benefactor to-day, devastator to-morrow, majestic, beautiful ever.

But when had town birds music for lovers' ears? Arthura and Valerian were off every morning, like liberated school-children, and nothing more was seen of them till the six-o'clock dinner. They would take the little steamer and go down the Erdre—the silvery, sleepy Erdre—thridding sedgy banks, now bright with iris and daffodil, and holms green as emerald, and low hills and coppice woods alive with song. Or they would use the little boats plying on the Loire, and alight at the first landing-place that invited, now to wander amid islanded apple orchards and quiet homesteads, now to climb the steep river-bank, and from some high point watch the ships hastening toward the sea.

Then, again, was the diligence. Without asking their destination, they would take their seats by the drivers, sure to come to some happy place, flowery meadows, little bits of woods still left to the birds and the squirrels, and bending rivers with weirs making tiny cascades.

But what pleased them best was just to take the common, unpoetic city omnibuses, and being drift in the suburbs, and shift for themselves. For this hoary, venerable city, like knotted and gnarled oak lightly covered with virgin ivy of purest green, or some other beautiful parasite, was rich in borrowed youth and rustic grace. No great surprises here, no natural wonders, but Nature in her sweetest, most gracious, most captivating mood. Other French cities possess far greater claims to suburban picturesqueness and grandeur, none such winning entourage of quiet caressing beauty. The happy lovers would then quit the diligence where it stopped at the octroi, and plunge, no matter where, so long as it was country, and not town.

And just outside the dusty high-roads, just beyond sound of railway whistle, they would find little Eden-like solitudes of verdure and floweriness, sun-lit velvety spaces between thicket and thicket, close-shut garths abloom with flower of apple and plum, a thousand lovely hiding-places for too happy hearts.

The charm of these little gold-green glades was the captivating way in which one led to another. It was like stepping from chamber to chamber in an enchanted palace. Cool, silent, delicious, rich in sunshine and umbrageous shadow, all were alike. Yet each seemed fairer than the last. These little open spaces, indeed, were but clearings of what had once been forest, carelessly left because there was land enough and to spare. As the pair threaded the green ways or sunned themselves, resting on the soft, warm, bloomy moss, farm-yard sounds would reach them from the homesteads nestled near—cackling of hens and quacking of ducks, cheery song of blue-bloused cowherd or contented bleating of goats. No stiles, no gates, no ha-ha hedges. Lovers keeping holiday may trespass unmolested in France.

Then the wild-flowers! Sometimes Arthura would leave Valerian to smoke his cigar, dream his day-dream, or watch the crimson-tufted hoopoe and the yellow oriole—melancholy birds!—under the hedge, and alone wade ankle-deep in flowers through the unknown meadows. In moist pastures by the river the air was sweet with the rock cistus and the grape hyacinth, whilst the open sunny reaches showed the deep purple columbine and the ox-eyed daisy. How warm and lustrous gleamed the grasses in the sun! No exotics fairer or half so ethereal as these tasseled blossoms all silver or gold. Here and there the sorrel flower glowed coral pink as a child's ear. But the glory of the world just then was the

mellow grass awaiting the mower's scythe. Who can describe it? Wave upon wave of feathery gold, the crowning glory of day and subdued splendor of night, sun and moon in one!

The evenings were no less blissful to the lovers, but hardly their own in company of the school-mistress and her fifteen-year-old daughter.

They would visit the crowded churches, warm and laden with breaths of flowers, and listen to the music in honor of the Catholics' Marie. It was such music as Arthura had never yet listened to—faultless, passionate, poetic.

Not only the human voice, but the very musical instruments seemed to throb with love, awe, and pious feeling; whilst throughout the vast isles, fragrant with fresh flowers, all was rapt silence. No sounds, but the melodic strains as they rose and fell, now filling the building, now dying away faint as an echo.

More in keeping with common minds was the military music in the public gardens; and thither they went, also for the sake of sociability and wandering between thickets of camellias and azalea, or beneath the fragrant small-leaved magnolia, now in full white and purple bloom. The stirring trumpet, the shrill clarion, the bugle, the drum, the swift gay measures, all seemed to echo love and joy.

Such distractions but lent wings to the uncounted hours. It seemed only yesterday they had come. To-morrow they must go. Arthura, bravest of the brave, turned pale at the thought which seemed to have burst upon her quite suddenly.

They were loitering in the quiet alleys of the garden, already so dear and familiar, when it occurred to her that it must be for the last time.

To-morrow they should be up betimes; the day after to-morrow no more dreams, no more love, no more confidences.

"I must say one thing," she said, passionately earnest and vehement. "I could bear to be separated from you. I should not mind that, for I know you will never, never change, my Valerian. But do not force me any longer to live the life that is a lie. Let me go, or let us tell the truth."

"My dearest child," he replied—it was precisely the reply she dreaded—"have a little more patience. Things will also be much easier for you. There is your holiday to come. I am going to take my cousin to London, perhaps to Paris."

"She will want me to go too," said Arthura, dismally. Nothing had power to depress her but Valerian's manner of looking at certain things.

"But how much easier is it to forget what we have on our minds when we are perpetually moving from place to place! You will have no time to trouble yourself with sophistries."

Arthura shook her head.

"I promise you one thing," she said, proudly. "I will keep silence as to our engagement. But I do not promise to stay with Miss Hermitage."

"My dear Arthura, we serve people much better by being politic than by all the Quixotism in the world. Our private matters concern not Christina at all. But she is really dependent on your company. It would be the greatest possible affliction to lose you. And if you are necessary to her, she is a thousand fold more necessary to you." He smiled upon her with lover-like pride and fondness as he added: "You have no accomplishments, my poor Arthura. You are a paragon, but of what? Not of book-learning certainly, and not in the matter of the arts either. Stay, then, with Christina, who enriches you just because you are what nature made you." There was deep, unanswerable worldly wisdom here.

Arthura thought of Steppie and the children, and sorrowfully held her peace.

"How happy we were when I first made your acquaintance at Margate!" she said at last. "Do you remember pulling Benjamine out of the water, and leaving your card next day? Then Benjamine running after you in the street to thank you, and the walks we took together! We shall never have so good a time again. And when you came one day with the good news that your rich relation would take me on trial, I could have kissed the very ground you walked upon. You were the veriest Providence to us!"

She was quietly weeping under her veil, but he added, cheerily,

"And now you look upon me almost as an enemy for having fallen in love with you."

"You must understand me," Arthura said, proudly, dashing away her tears. "All the burdens that seemed so heavy before—my father's debts, the children's maintenance—these are nothing compared to the weight on my mind now. We both owe everything to Miss Hermitage. It breaks my heart to deceive her."

"Foolish child!" said Valerian, bending low and whispering in her ear. "It is only a sport, a play. In a year or two, when our circumstances have a little mended, we will come to France again, and on a different errand. You know

on what! It will be in my cousin's own interest to forgive us then."

With these vague, lover-like consolations he cheered her drooping spirits, and Arthura, finding that her words made no impression, changed the subject.

It was a new and bitter experience to her that even love could not make two people understand each other in all things. And what is love worth, indeed, if it fails to unveil heart to heart?

Nevertheless the home journey was made pleasantly, even gayly. Valerian was a perfect lover. Arthura could but let herself be made happy, after foolish lovers' fashion, and there was no failing of her courage when once more the sun arose on a common day.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUT can the sun ever be said to shine on a common day? Just as the heavens are thronged with dark stars, globe upon globe, that wander unperceived amid their shining compeers, so human events are in part hidden from observation. We see and take account of what is conspicuous and self-evident; little do we dream of all that is going on around us, under our very eyes even, perhaps far more momentous to ourselves personally, but unrecognized and unrecorded for the time being as if they were not.

No sooner were the shutters opened and the blinds raised in Miss Hermitage's house than all was bustle and commotion. A thousand things had to be done, a dozen plans matured; May to be spent in Paris, June in London, the hot months on the banks of the Thames or in the Highlands, then back again by November to the kindly south coast.

"But mind, Valerian, not to the same house," Miss Hermitage said. "A house, like a husband, should always be taken on trial. It is wonderful how perfect houses and people seem when they do not belong to us, when we can get rid of them at a moment's notice. The very notion of not being able to get rid of a thing makes it odious. So no houses except on short leases."

Arthura found it easy to be light-hearted amid the distractions of a general packing up. But what if she could have heard a certain conversation going on just then between her lover and Mr. Constantine? The old man had called to

take leave of his cousin, and catching Valerian by the button, carried him off to his lodgings.

"Give me five minutes, or a quarter of an hour at most, my dear Valerian," he said, comfortably settling down for a leisurely talk. "You are rich in time, a millionaire, indeed, but I am a pauper, my few wretched coins, counted out every day, fast dwindling."

"An hour if you please, sir," Valerian said, in his airiest, pleasantest manner. Busy as he was all day, he always found time to be pleasant.

"You are a very agreeable person; you ought to succeed, as the phrase goes," began Mr. Constantine, perusing the other's physiognomy with uncommon attention. "But now tell me, my good Valerian—I am interested in you, as I am bound to be, of course—tell me your own notion of success. What do you mean to do with yourself? What have you thought of as a career? For of course you must not spend the best part of your life in simply making yourself agreeable."

Valerian laughed his little hard, worldly laugh. "I ought to plume myself in being able to do that," he said, sarcastically. "It is at least a livelihood."

"You have caught the family trick of jesting with serious things, I see. But listen to me. If, as I take it, you have good parts, and if, as I am willing to believe, you have feelings to match, then, my dear Valerian, you need not rest satisfied with being a finished nobody."

Valerian laughed once more.

"It is not every nobody who can be finished, so I pay you a compliment after all. But now just think how much better you might do. As far as possibilities go, you are the luckiest person in the world."

"Possibilities can hardly be regarded as a career either," Valerian made light and biting answer.

"Ah! you are far from divining my purport. What, then, is not within your reach if Stephana consents to marry you? All things are possible where a generous woman is concerned."

Valerian sat still, flushed, dazed, unable to open his lips.

"We are alone. I am an old man, and her kinsman as well as yours. I may speak openly to you," continued Mr. Constantine. "And I tell you I dare aver that Stephana would marry you, out of pure generosity, maybe, but of a kind not to be spurned."

Valerian remained dumb.

"The fact is, my dear Valerian, Stephana is noble to a degree that may be called Quixotic. The very reason that might prevent another woman from giving you her hand would induce Stephana to proffer hers. You must understand me."

Still Valerian's pale lips found no words.

"Stephana would of her own accord and in her own person atone to you for the wrong done you by one also of our kith and kin. But before going any further let me remind you of an important point. This sweet, lovely Stephana has a propensity which may have escaped your notice. She is always on the lookout for people's 'souls.' If you have not a soul, I fear she will have nothing to say to you."

"What is a soul?" asked Valerian, half in jest, half serious.

"You may well ask what," said the old man. "But Stephana knows. Stephana is not to be deceived. Now I am quite sure she is prepared to marry you. But I am equally sure of another thing: you must satisfy her exactions on moral and spiritual points. I am in earnest, Valerian. This noble creature has nothing in common with certain others of our name, but name. The world for her is no mere fair, no raree-show got up for sensual gratification, but a serious place—a place in which our business is to do, and not look vacantly on. As the steward of Stephana's fortunes, your work would lie in wholly new lines."

"Pardon me, I ask with all respect," Valerian said, still unmanned, and even agitated, "but will you tell me if Stephana has authorized you to speak to me on the subject?"

"She has," replied Mr. Constantine. "One word more, however, about this said business of the soul. It is the most weighty, after all, for everything hangs on it. Stephana's fortune and future are wedded to the public good. Would you be ready to aid and uphold her? to sympathize with her philanthropic schemes, and not to rail at them? You must know, my good Valerian, that doing good, as the phrase goes, is a serious matter nowadays. The Holy Elizabeths and Vincent de Pauls are out of date, outlandish as the clothes they wore, obsolete as the speech they used. What alone can help the world now is a magnanimous public spirit, a new and more righteous law, not baskets of broken bread for the poor and spitals for the old."

He looked inquisitorially at his companion, and added, laughing lightly: "You know something of my career—no

irreproachable one in the matter of domestic relations, no exemplary one in matters of finance. But mark me, Valerian, from first to last I have steadfastly kept my post in the vanguard of progressive opinion, and Liberalism, like charity, covereth a multitude of sins. I was a spendthrift at your age, a sad wild fellow too, but I have helped to amend more than one bad law, to frame more than one just one. The world owes more to me, the sinner, than to many a congregation of saints."

"That may well be, sir," Valerian said, laughing.

"Hearken, my dear Valerian. Let not the belief in what I call twopenny-halfpenny morality be your stumbling-block. Mind, I am not jeering at the bread-and-butter virtues. A man is bound to possess them, just as he is bound to have his linen washed and his beard trimmed; he is a reprobate without. But never think that you will save your soul (another phrase for fulfilling your duty) by being what is called an indulgent husband, a kind father, and so forth. Pshaw! The epitaphs make me sick, for, I ask you now, is it any credit to a man to be kind to his own wife, good to his own children? Were he otherwise he must stand lower than the brutes; but write what eulogies you please on the tomb of him who has befriended the abandoned wife and the widow, who has fathered the orphan, adopted the friendless."

"The fact is," Valerian made answer, "so little virtue has hitherto shone in the world that we have had to make the most of it."

"Aptly said. Now note for a moment the abjectness of human ideals, when we glorify what we are pleased to call maternal devotion. Why, the she-animals will give up their lives for their young. Is a woman to be praised for what is no virtue among the brutes? And this same beautiful maternal devotion, forsooth! Do you suppose there was none of it among the fair-haired Southerners who, with babes at their own breasts, could see black sucklings daily torn away from their mothers? Were the Roman matrons devoid of maternal devotion, think you, while they could amuse themselves with torturing their slaves? The fact is, we are still in an age of rudimentary virtue. The higher is yet to be acquired, and then an epitaph will have some meaning."

Again his eyes wandered to Valerian.

"I really do not know if I am merely hearkened to out of pure amiability and politeness, or if you are of this way of thinking."

"To tell you the plain truth," Valerian answered, promptly, "I have been so much occupied in amusing Christina that I have had no time to think of other things."

"Poor Christina! Who will amuse her in another world, I wonder? But the inclination, my dear fellow—what about the inclination?"

"I will not play the hypocrite, sir. I have administered the funds intrusted to me by my cousin for charitable purposes to the best of my abilities, and there the matter has ended. It is little of heart or conscience that I have put into the business."

"That is candidly spoken. But now, supposing Stephana marries you, are you prepared to put heart and conscience, not into giving away money—charity, so called—but into the larger, wider interests of life? Between ourselves, Stephana has set her mind on seeing you in Parliament."

Valerian started and again flushed.

"You may well be surprised. But it is not impossible. If I live it is not impossible, that is to say. You know that I was many years in Parliament myself. Had I had a son, a nephew, a grandson, a great-nephew, handy last year on the occasion of the election, the thing would have been accomplished. Such an opportunity may occur again."

"You are very kind," Valerian said, utterly discomfited and embarrassed.

"There you are, swearing by the two penny-halfpenny virtues, the bread-and-butter moralities, again. Do not think so meanly of Stephana and myself as to suppose that we should put a weighty responsibility upon your shoulders out of mere kindness, a wish to be agreeable. No, Valerian, I speak once for all plainly to you. Take in my meaning. We want an exponent, a mouthpiece. We want an heir of our convictions. For if I can not leave you an obolus (I shall have just one left to pay the dark ferryman's fare), I can at least bequeath you something not to be bought with money. You would come before the world as the inheritor of my political and social opinions."

"I am most deeply beholden to you—to Stephana no less," began Valerian, falteringly. "But—"

"But you are taken by surprise. You want to be left to yourself awhile. We quite understand that," replied Mr. Constantine, kindly. "Nor can Stephana be pressed either. She begged me to add that. You must say nothing to her till she herself opens the subject."

Valerian breathed more freely.

"Should I write to her?" he asked.

"By no means. I was only to clear the way, as it were, for future negotiations," said Mr. Constantine. "Say nothing, do nothing, till she first gives a sign."

"And when will that be, sir?" asked Valerian, still pale and anxious.

"Perhaps to-morrow, perhaps a year hence. Who can answer for a woman?" laughed Mr. Constantine.

"We are not likely to meet just yet," Valerian said, with sudden alacrity. "I am to carry off our cousin to Paris to-morrow."

"To Paris! And what on earth has Christina to do in Paris? Buy new ball dresses and new bonnets to carry with her to Persephone's kingdom? Has she thought of the small amount of luggage permitted us on that journey? But never mind. Give her my love, Valerian—my best love. She has just sent me a dozen of Madeira."

"And what are you going to do, sir?"

"What should an octogenarian do but sit in the sun, and get a neighbor to listen to his babblings? Good-by, my dear fellow. Bring Christina and her new bonnets safe back from Paris."

What could Valerian do but feel ready to curse alike his good and evil fortune? The evil, indeed, seemed more bearable than the good just then. To endure poverty, insignificance, nay, ignominy, by Arthura's side would be easy; but to give up Arthura's love for the cold splendor of Stephana's friendship was impossible. He would write to her at once, thank her for her magnanimity, and reveal the truth.

There was nothing else, indeed, to do. Stephana should receive a letter explaining everything that very day. Having come to a conclusion without immediately acting upon it, Valerian's mind, as often happens, now went through a series of indecisions that finally landed him on one of a directly opposite nature.

To write to Stephana was the only straightforward, manly, inevitable course. So said Valerian at the outset, yet, because he did not forthwith sit down to do it, one sophistry after another made itself heard on the other side. He must write warily. Stephana must not know of the trap into which Christina had fallen. Such a disclosure would prove fatal to Arthura's prospects as well as his own. Some other justificatory plea must be put forward. But what plea? A

hint of concealed romance, a vague indication of the reality? No; suspicion would naturally fall on Arthura, and by little and little the whole truth would ooze out. To wait, to temporize, to trust to happy chance, seemed at first the easiest and soon the only expedient, even practicable, course.

And, after all, there was no question of love on Stephana's side. That he knew right well. Stephana's nature was high-minded, large-hearted generosity—nothing more. When she might fairly be intrusted with his story she would very likely feel a sense of relief, and profess herself quite ready to do all for Arthura's lover that she had proposed to do for a husband. And finally, reasoned Valerian, nothing was to be gained and all hazarded by precipitation. He had fallen into the common mistake of measuring others by his own standard, failing to take into account that he had here to do, not with the world, but with a noble woman. How should he know that truth was to Stephana as the very air she breathed, the mere suspicion of falsehood or make-believe being poison to her?

Gradually, therefore, he decided to put away present perplexities with the comfortable thought of compromise. He should win Stephana over to his cause by tact and persuasion, and thus obtain at last all the advantages she had proffered, without sacrificing Arthura. He should become Arthura's husband and Stephana's heir.

Nor did it seem incumbent upon him to unbosom himself to Arthura. Why disturb her mind and make her unhappy by the thought that she was standing between him and his fortunes? Time enough to tell the flattering tale when she should be his wife, and would listen playfully and proudly. And there was another re-assuring thought: Stephana might very likely change her mind altogether. Valerian finally ended his cogitation by willing one thing and wishing another. Arthura must, should be his wife. None the less Stephana should give him a brilliant position in the world.

CHAPTER XV.

LITTLE time indeed had the lovers for confidential talk either in Paris or London. Just as the choicest cates are to be had for money, so what is called agreeable society becomes

a matter of the purse. We are perhaps the very best company in the world, but the wise and the witty, our compeers, are bribed by the rich inviter, and we sit down to our Barmecide's feast alone. Alexander visited the son of Sinope in his tub, it is true; but then the fame of Diogenes was greater than that of Alexander. Few of us but would dine off the cynic's portion of beans once in our lives if we were sure to be talked of ever after. For the most part the Diogeneses are forgotten, and well for those who have wit that the dull never find it out! Were the man of intellectual parts and spirit appreciated by the mob, he would be more pestered than a Prime Minister.

Miss Hermitage's comfortable hôtel on the Champs Elysées was filled from morning till night with well-dressed, gay, and pleasant visitants. Everybody was seeing everything, and of course had something to say. It were hard indeed had they not, considering that amusement was the business of life. For what Miss Hermitage was doing so deliberately and with such desperate resolve the rest were doing as a matter of course. Why moralize? Is not half the world occupied in amusing the other half? Is it not in the natural order of things that we should lazily enjoy whilst others toil and moil? If it ought not to be so, then why is it so? Let the moralist answer.

“I do think Paris quite perfection,” Miss Hermitage said. “No dingy little streets; no rags and poverty at every corner. All spick and span, brand-new, and handsome. And what a comfort that the woe-begone-looking people keep out of sight!”

Herein was she not following the example of her neighbors also? Let the stark face of misery hide itself, let want not make moan in our hearing do we not all say? What have we to do with pain and sorrow not our own? Away with them! Let us turn the corner and look in another direction. Yet methinks we can not always shut out these unsightly phantoms that cross us in the common paths. Who has not seen, without being able to forget, some tear-stained, anguish-stricken face in the crowd, some wan specter, hardly man or woman any longer for the wastings of some hunger or disease? Who has not encountered at some time or other a pair of human eyes from which looked out an awful, an unutterable despair? We jostle elbows and pass by, but the look haunts us for days, and will not vanish altogether. Did some angel of pity meet these unhappy ones ere it was too late, or

did the gulf of misery swallow them up? We shall never know.

"Mind, Valerian," Miss Hermitage would often say to her steward, "no niggardliness to the poor. There are more sham beggars than true ones, I have no doubt. That is not your concern. In relieving all I relieve my conscience."

This easy-going philanthropy, as she called it, settled uncomfortable self-questionings; but whilst Valerian was bidden to lavish money on the suffering and the needy, he was also enjoined to keep them out of her sight.

"It is all very well for poor people to sympathize with one another," she said. "They have nothing else but good wishes to give. Why should I allow my feelings to be harrowed up when I can give a guinea instead? It is much more to the purpose than floods of tears, I am sure."

What, therefore, with bringing light-hearted, prosperous guests to Miss Hermitage's threshold and keeping the dismal away, Valerian and Arthura had not a fraction of time left for love-making. Even our most trustworthy friends, those who are as the apple of our eye, will sometimes fall ill, grow low-spirited, marry, or die—all social sins of the first magnitude in Miss Hermitage's eyes. People must be ailing at times, certainly; must have troubles; must pair off; must make an end. But they were bound to perform these duties amusingly, or at least agreeably, and with due regard to the feelings of others.

"Poor dear Constantine," she said, regretfully, on the eve of quitting Paris. "I am sorry, after all, that we did not bring him. He would have greatly enjoyed himself. But at his age who can tell what may happen? and with the best intentions in the world he might have died in the house. No; we must all think of ourselves in this world. Life is too short to think of other people."

If the mazy whirl of Paris and London were acceptable, no less so the cool retreat on the banks of the Thames whither Miss Hermitage resorted for rustic pleasures.

"A pleasing land of drowsy-head" it was, from which Valerian was bound to keep away tediousness. Miss Hermitage had a passion for animals, but it fared the same with them as with human beings. The slow, pensive dog must not be tolerated. The cat less given to purring than it ought had no place on her window-sill. Even the cocks and hens must be knowing, and the pig must have *esprit*. She had rather a fancy for plain homely farm-yard creatures; they re-

minded her of her childhood. But good parts she would have at any price in both man and beast; and as wit and spirit may be hired, if not bought, what could Valerian do but go to the proper market? Nevertheless, he must be accredited with the inventiveness of Scheherezade or Haroun-al-Raschid's court jester. His position, indeed, was much like theirs, and it is wonderful to reflect how most people's wits would be sharpened under the same circumstances. Death by the sword or belaboring with a bag of stones unless you begin to be entertaining this very minute!

Is there a dolt who would not straightway sparkle like rare Ben Jonson himself under the threat? And perhaps some of us would run the risk of the penalty for the sake of being thus translated. To wake up and find one's self famous were a faint emotion compared with that of waking up and finding one's self a wit after having been a dunderhead for years.

It is easy to be light-hearted in summer-time; even an unquiet conscience may be lulled to sleep by rose-laden breezes and the soft stirring of green leaves above our bare heads, and Arthura caught the spirit of her patroness's Castle of Indolence. Valerian managed things so beautifully that there was no need to quarrel with him any more. Miss Hermitage had entertainment enough without. And so long as they were not forced to quarrel, Arthura could do without love-making. Valerian dared not be more than courteous; he even feigned little flirtations with one or two of the pretty girls who looked as if they had walked out of Watteau's picture on to Miss Hermitage's lawn. But once perhaps in a week the lovers would find time for a word.

"I have got a fortnight's holiday for you; you are to go home next week," said Valerian one day when the pair were absolutely alone, Miss Hermitage and Colette drowsing, as was their wont after lunch, the servants amusing themselves with hay-making in sight of the house, hardly a creature within.

Arthura's eyes brimmed over with tears of joy. A whole fortnight, and so soon! It seemed too good to be true.

"If you take your step-mother and the children to Margate, may I run down to see you?" asked the radiant lover.

Beauty is doubly beautiful in summer-time, when dress is worn for grace, and not for a defense against the cold.

Arthura's was no shy, artless loveliness, looking its best in innocent white muslin and blue waist-ribbon. She must be sumptuous even in summer-time, and her fine eyes and rich

complexion were never seen to better advantage than now. The color and texture of her dress, wine-red, soft, with creamy ground, had metamorphosed her into a gorgeous flower. If the girl's eyes became moist with joy, Valerian's beamed with lover-like pride and admiration.

"You beautiful thing!" he said, standing back to gaze on the picture. "You animated Gladiola! Where do you get these astounding dresses from? Yesterday your gown was the color of a peony, to-day silky white dashed with purple!"

"It pleases Miss Hermitage to see me fine as a peacock," Arthura answered, carelessly. "And I have a passion for gorgeous colors myself. They put me in spirits, like military music."

"Well, you shall never be out of spirits," laughed Valerian. "There are plenty of beautiful gowns now to be had for money. Although," he added, quite intoxicated by the dazzling apparition before him, "you would look just as well in a brown holland pinafore over bombazine, which is what you will have to wear when we are married."

"Dear Valerian," she said, her sportive mood vanished, all the pure, fond, girlish devotion of her heart for once on her lips and in her eyes, "do you love me? Will you love me always?"

The woman's question answered in the man's way. "Always? As if it could be otherwise than always!" and he raised a fold of the superb gown to his lips and kissed it passionately. Arthura, holding him off at arm's length by the hands, looked into his eyes as if to read his very soul.

"Are men ever constant?" she asked, half in sport, half in earnest.

"Wait and see, Santa Thomasina," was the confident answer.

It was a rare moment for both. They seemed once more in France, free to love, free to dream blissful dreams, to be happy. There was such a rapturousness in the air, rose-scented air wafting crimson velvety petals upon the lovers as they stood by the open window, such a burden of love in the songs of the little lazy birds, such deep unspoken contentment in the hum of the bees and murmur of insects.

And the voiceless flower world? Was there no joy, no sympathy there as one glowing rose-leaf after another nestled to Arthura's bosom, like little Loves seeking a home? It seemed as if it might be so to the lovers, neither wiser nor more foolish in their bliss than any other pair.

Anyhow, an hour of love with all its fair promises was vouchsafed to this sweet trusting Arthura. Had ever any woman more ?

CHAPTER XVI.

IT is quite possible to be too happy, and Arthura was now in such a case. She had found a little lodging which Steppie declared "was really the next best thing to being in heaven."

She had nothing to do, and felt as if she never should have anything to do again; fourteen days, two clear weeks, a whole fortnight, seemed an unending portion of felicity. Time might be really squandered under such circumstances, the clock disregarded, enjoyment sipped, ecstasy taken in homœopathic doses.

"Too delightful," sighed Steppie. "I really could be quite happy if it were not for the thought of being so miserable to-morrow."

"Why to-morrow? Are you positive that Benjamine will be drowned to-morrow?" asked Arthura, with eyes wide open.

"Arthura, how can you jest at serious things? But you know we can never expect to be happy for two days running."

"We must keep our eyes open, then, and see that the misfortune comes," Arthura said, with much gravity. "Baby must swallow a penny, Walter get bitten by an octopus in the sea, you or I set fire to ourselves."

"Ah! you would not make light of misfortunes if you had had as many as I have," sighed Steppie.

"The more we have, the lighter we must make of them," was the cheerful answer.

"We should all do that if we understood our duty, of course," replied Steppie, still pensive. "I suppose troubles are sent on purpose."

"Well, I shall certainly have to do myself some bodily harm, then," Arthura added. "Would you rather have me break an arm, or sprain an ankle? No, dear little mamma," said the girl, throwing her arms round her young stepmother's neck, and kissing her fondly. "We will be happy whilst we may, and only miserable when we must. So now let us run about with the children."

Never was such a place for running about. It seemed the business of life, and the propensity was encouraged by the

absence of barriers and boundary marks. A stranger might have imagined himself thrown among a set of Christian Communists, so entirely did the earth and its first-fruits seem common property. The cattle unconcernedly walked in procession from one open pasture to another, the very hens, with that abuse of liberty apt to creep into socialist communities, strayed from the wide walks allotted them into neighboring precincts, whilst the pigs shamelessly and unblushingly roamed about as if every inch of soil belonged to them. Arthura had discovered one of the few spots in our dear native land as yet unvisited by the world. It was a little rustic hamlet standing above the fair open reaches dividing the Sussex downs from the sea, a veritable bower of greenery between the billowy sand-hills and the level lines of marsh and shore, now all gold green and silver sheen, beyond a thread of turquoise, for the sea was in sight. Linnets' Mill the place was called, and indeed "the lintwhites sing in chorus" there, and many another bird besides.

Round the windmill crowning the hamlet were open breezy spaces and little coppices, with wonderfully gorgeous cottage gardens shyly hidden behind tangled hedges. Half-way between the mill and the shore rose the hoary ruins of the ancient Norman fortress, now garlanded, as if in token of reconciliation, with the ripe gold of the English wall-flower. Then you came to the smooth sands and the rippling little waves, and—miracle of miracles!—the great yellow sea-poppies.

How happy they were! Heavens! how happy they were! Even Steppie was cheerful: and let none blame her pensiveness too harshly. She was not magnanimous, but she possessed the bread-and-butter virtues. She filled her children's minds with artless piety; she took everybody to be better than herself, which is already a step upward; and all her ways were ways of prettiness and grace, a great quality in a woman.

"If I were only not quite useless in the world," she sighed to Arthura. "That is my grievance. I am of no earthly use to anybody."

"But no one would find it out unless you told them," Arthura said.

"Why, would not you find it out?" asked Steppie, opening her gentle blue eyes.

"No, I am sure I should never have dreamed of such a thing," was the ready and comfortable reply. "Besides, it

is not true. What would the children do without you to take care of them?"

"I have often wished that I had never been born, and then, you see, the poor children would never have been born either."

"No, I do not see it, little mamma," Arthura made reply. "If you had never been born here, the chances are that you would have come into existence on the planet Jupiter, where the day is as long as our year, and the year three times twelve months or more. You would not have liked that."

"Must I have been born, then, anyhow?" asked Steppie, looking aghast.

"I suppose so, since here you are."

"Steppie pondered. "I wish I understood things," she said.

"But nobody really understands anything, so you are as well off as Sir Isaac Newton," was the reply.

"I wish I understood the purpose of my own existence, I mean," continued poor Steppie. "Why was ever a woman born to scream at a mouse?"

"If you scream at a mouse, it is because you have nothing better to do, not because you were predestined to scream," replied Arthura.

"You have always an answer for everything. Well, what I could be predestined for I can not conceive."

"Things hang together," again Arthura made ready answer. "It does not do to be too inquiring. You are Steppie, and I am Arthura, and that is all we shall ever know about the matter."

With such talk as this, the pair would beguile the moments whilst the children sported like little Loves in the warm still water, or gathered on the rocks. For the most part, however, they kept together, Walter hardly bearing to quit Arthura's side. The boy's devotion to his step-sister was one of those beautiful passions of childhood akin to the blind devotion of animals to their master, yet not flawless like these. Cling to us, love us, as they may, it is children who first remind us of the instability of human affection.

"My own, own Arthura," said Walter one day, as he watched a distant sail, "do you know what I am thinking of?"

"We were both thinking of the same thing, I am sure—of being together at Christmas, and how soon Christmas will be here."

"No," continued the boy. "I was looking at the ship

yonder, and wondering when I shall have my heart's desire, and be a sailor and see all the countries of the world."

Arthura kissed the little eager face, and said nothing. Of what use to reproach him? He would not understand. Meantime, the too happy days glided by, and no Valerian. Arthura was as free from sentimentality as a girl could be; she had already joys enough and to spare; but his coming would have heightened all. And he had said it. He would, he must come, were it only for an hour!

"Well," Steppie said, when the holidays were nearly over, "two days more of happiness, and then everything will be worse than ever. I do think we should never lay ourselves out for enjoyment. It makes life twice as hard afterward."

"No; it really makes life twice as easy," reasoned Arthura. "Just think for a moment. If a little bird gets berries one winter day, he will not die of starvation although not a berry he'll get next day. To-day's feast enables us to bear up against to-morrow's starvation."

"Yes, I must bear up. That is the word. If I could only bear up!" said Steppie.

"But there is nothing for you to bear up against as yet," Arthura answered, gayly. "It is sheer fancy about being unhappy. You are in reality as happy as possible."

"Oh, Arthura!"

"If you were unhappy, you would soon find out the difference. I should never come near you, to begin with."

"Would you be so unkind?" asked Steppie, with tears in her eyes.

"It would be my duty. Unhappy people—I mean those who make themselves unhappy about nothing at all—should be avoided like lepers. They ought to have their meals set down on the threshold, and sit huddled together in a dark corner at church."

"I am sure I hope I shall never be avoided like a leper," sighed Steppie.

"Then you must wear a little looking-glass tied round your neck, as some people wear muffs, and every ten minutes you must satisfy yourself that you are not looking glum. Low spirits may be cured that way."

"May they really? Ah, you make fun of me," poor Steppie said, whereupon Arthura laughingly kissed her a dozen times.

Steppie's real name was the pretty but now old-fashioned Emma, and her patronymic, with peculiar appropriateness,

Sadgrove. How well certain names fasten themselves to certain individuals, as if singled out by especial fitness to belong to them!

Why, for instance, should this melancholious little personage more than any other happen to be born with the name of Sadgrove? Marriage had mended matters so far that she was no longer called Sadgrove, but Edgar, a good old Saxon name, and worthily mated with Emma. Yet Sadgrove nature had christened her, and Sadgrove she remained. Her old school-fellows persisted in using her maiden name. She signed herself Sadgrove as well as Edgar, evidently loath to part with a piece of symbolism so appropriate.

The innocent, rustic hours! How they flew by! To the little town-bred children it seemed a year since they left home, yet when the moment of departure was at hand, the year had vanished like a cloud. They were to return to London next day, and Linnets' Mill, with its wide fair heavens and green happy earth, would be shut from their gaze like a fairy scene on which the curtain has fallen. And still no Valerian! Instead, a fond caressing love-letter. Stephana had come, he wrote, and Miss Hermitage wanted him.

Arthura resigned herself, knowing well that her mistress, with all her off-hand kindnesses, was not to be moved where her own pleasure was concerned. She relied on Valerian as she relied on these fond clinging things around her.

Was she not his as well as theirs, and did he not love her before anything in the wide world? So she kept up everybody's spirits to the last, and even Steppie shed no tears at the leave-taking.

"After all," she moralized whilst they waited for the train, "how much worse everything might have turned out! Not one of us poisoned by mushrooms, or even tossed by an infuriated bull. I am sure Providence has watched over us wonderfully so far."

CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN the little company by the sea had broken up in May, the blind story-teller followed Stephana to London, neither of them bent on heedless quests, we may be sure. The gods, says the Greek poet, bring like to like; and, do what they might, these kindred souls could not remain long apart. Just as evil finds out evil in order to work its dark purpose, so do

finer spirits consort together for good. The blind man must do something with his life, and there was Stephana ready to help him or any other human thing in spiritual need.

"It was kind of you to come and see me," she said. "I feel lonely in London."

"You lonely anywhere? When mortal friends stay away, have you not unearthly visitants," he replied, "strange sweet voices unheard by others, ineffable visions not granted to common eyes? You surely are never solitary."

He felt the smile he could not see. Stephana made soft reply. Her voice was music always.

"Dear friend, let me disabuse your mind, for once and for all, concerning what you are pleased to call my supernatural powers. Do I hear inner voices? Do things unseen at times become plain to me? Am I surrounded by subtle influences that lead me whither I should not otherwise go, and force me into deeds against my will? Yes, and what is all this but to say that I am more sensitive than my fellows, more alive to the spiritual world so near us all, yet hidden from most? For what are we ourselves but spirits, only the fleshly clog drags to earth, and the thick clay shrouds the flames. I liken my own gifts, humbly enough, Heaven knows, to those flashes of intellectual light that have revealed hidden knowledge to men. May the report well be—we have seen, indeed, that there are—spiritual endowments of the same force by which moral darkness has also been illuminated? I am weak, only herein strong."

"Most beautifully have you spoken so far, dearest lady. But go on. There is more behind."

"I may, after all, be only magnifying the power of conscience, exaggerating the faculty of conjuring up things unseen," Stephana went on, "but I have always seemed to be illuminated, then impelled, guided to a certain end. And no matter the resistance offered, either by the world or even my own inclinations, when once the vision has shone upon me, and the voice made itself heard within, I obey. I am no longer a personality, but an instrument."

"This consciousness should make you happy," said the eager, pensive listener.

"No," added Stephana, eager also. "We need no such inner promptings to be happy. Happiness has but to beckon, and the weakest of purpose will follow. I am impelled to tread hard, thorny ways, leaving the smooth for others."

"Do, then, these mysterious calls interfere with your own

life? Have they brought you bale instead of blessing?" asked her listener.

Stephana paused. When she spoke her voice was low and full of tenderness.

"I should be able to say anything to you, my most faithful friend," she said—"you who have given me your best affection. Yes, at the risk of causing pain, I will speak out. Could I, then, shut my conscience to the voices within, and become blind to the revelations that are plainer to me than the things passing under my eyes, I should dare to be happy in my own way." For a moment tears stopped her utterance; then she added, in gentlest tones: "Which is your way also. I would be your wife."

The blind man flushed painfully, and an eager word rose to his lips, but it was checked before utterance. He could only listen in trembling hushed expectation.

"Do not misunderstand me, my friend," continued Stephana. "As warm a friendship—I may say affection—as I feel for any human being, I could give you, but no deeper feeling."

"I know, I understand. Your love was long ago given to another."

"Love! love!" said Stephana, with intense bitterness. "Why is this word perpetually on our lips, when the thing itself is a dream, a chimera? But you shall know how it is with me. I did marry because I believed in love—who could otherwise set seal to such a bond? And now"—she flushed also, and faltered as she got out the words—"I shall perhaps marry again, just because I believe in love no longer, but in something higher, which is duty."

Her listener sank back in his chair, white and strengthless, as if stricken with a blow. Pale also, but quite calm, Stephana went on.

"I must obey my destiny, and what is destiny but duty?" she said, unconsciously repeating the words of a great poet. "It is all very sad and strange, this being led away from the life I could love and cling to, and made to embrace, against my inclinations and existence, the very opposite I should choose. I am going to marry my cousin Valerian."

"The worldling Valerian! the matchlessly expedient Valerian! You can not marry him," cried the blind man, passionately and indignantly. "He has many excellent qualities, I know, but not one to set him on your level."

"You shall learn why it must be so," Stephana went on,

sorrowfully, yet with quiet resolution. "And to make things clear to you I must intrust you with a bit of our family history. We are close friends, are we not? My secrets are yours?"

"Till the last moment of my life," was the fervent answer, whilst the speaker gently raised the lady's hand to his lips.

"You should know, then," Stephana continued, faintly smiling, "that Valerian possesses the inestimable virtue of being a victim, a scapegoat. In his person he is a living witness of sin, silent, unpunished, unvindicable sin. He owes his birth to some coward of our blood who refused to give him a name."

"I know—I have heard the story," said the blind man, with a touch of impatience. "But you will never make a martyr of Valerian."

"Is not that man or woman a martyr who owes even the means of existence to stray benevolence? Valerian's history needs no flourishes. I will only tell you the bare facts in a word or two. The father, then, of my second cousin Christina—Christina the millionaire, the mundane—had only one son, who all his life long was expected to make a fine match, as the phrase goes. He died at fifty, a bachelor and a good-for-nothing, and so the great fortune came to his sister on the father's death. But there are first cousins of Christina's, sons of her father's brothers, as the law goes, next of kin, Valerian being nobody's kin. Now Christina's brother declared on his dying bed that he left no child, or otherwise the old man, their father, would have adopted him. Of the three cousins I speak of one has sons born in wedlock, the second daughters only, and neither of the two would ever claim the boy."

"Who can say that he is of your blood at all?"

"Of that there is no doubt," Stephana went on with more and more emphasis, bending her whole mind to the conviction of her prejudiced listener. "Could you see him, you would need no other proof. A Hermitage, a Gossip (our two family names), to the finger-tips. Let me go on, however. There was the third brother, of whom little is known, who spent his life in wandering, and died in foreign parts. This man, the most amiable and gifted of the family, must have been Valerian's father, and so my cousin Constantine believes. How the child was found by Christina and her friend Colette you may have heard. He had been brought to the house, none knew how or by whom, and was discov-

ered in my uncle's room, with a note sewed up in his clothes declaring his name, no more.”

The pale sad listener shook his head. “All this may be—is, since you say so. But where the argument for such a sacrifice on your part, such royal cargo to the too fortunate Valerian? Young, accomplished, self-confident, backed up by Miss Hermitage's fortune, he is already happy beyond most.”

“Oh,” cried Stephana, eagerly, almost passionately, “why must that word be ever and ever on our lips? It is not Valerian's happiness I am thinking of. Valerian does not need me, I know, yet duty forces me across his path. I must be his good angel against my will. For you already divine it,” she added, growing earnest, pathetic—everything by turns that could win her listener over to her own way of seeing things. “I am under a spell here. I can not go backward or turn to the right or the left. It was Valerian who brought me from Rome, Valerian who leads me onward now. I wish I could make you understand. Were you a woman and Valerian your kinsman, yet an outcast, a pariah, disowned by reason of others' sin, and those our kinsfolk, I think you would feel the same generous impulse to befriend him too, although it is more than an impulse with me. Just after that strange summons you know of—”

“Ah, the Roman story. Would I might hear that from your own lips!”

“Just after the strange summons, then (the story do not ask), I had a dream—a vision I must call it, for no common dream it could be—a vision, then, so sweet, so solemn, so beautiful, that I can hardly put it into words. I had been pondering one day on my own career, which I felt had to be begun anew, shedding also a few tears over the brief disillusion that love and marriage had brought, asking myself piteously and painfully whither should duty lead, when on a sudden I was aware of a wondrous apparition. The twilight chamber became luminous with silvery light, and in the midst, so near to me that I could have touched his shining garment with my hand, stood an awful and lovely form. Nothing I had ever beheld in living human shape or idealized in art was half so radiant, so divinely fair, as this figure, clothed angelwise with pearly wings, and having an aureole of pale gold round the stately head. A smile, serene, ineffable, played on the beautiful lips, but in the steady gaze of the calm clear eyes and on the broad starry forehead I read such inevitable decree,

such unswerving doom, that I trembled. 'Speak,' I prayed. 'O heavenly monitor, be your errand of retribution or sacrifice, you have but to reveal it, and I obey!' Not a word, however, passed the lips of the phantom—eidolon—I know not what to call it; but as I waited thus, prayerful and expectant, I saw that he held an open scroll in his hands, and the meaning of every sign and word flashed upon me. It was a piece of emblazonry, wherein I discerned, one after another, the proud scutcheons of my race, with the names of those who had borne them, down to my own generation; but the last name of all stood bare and apart. And it was the name of Valerian."

For a moment Stephana paused. Thrilling with the passion of her story, she now went on:

"A minute more, and the dream had faded. I was again alone, but with new, strange thoughts crowding in my mind. Valerian, then, was my duty, my future, my destiny. But after what fashion? What was the sin of Valerian's progenitor to me? How should this especial retribution fall on myself? During painful days and nights I brooded over the mystery till all became plain and unmistakable to my mind. Valerian had suffered shameful wrong, and there was none to make reparation but me. I was in my own person bound to atone for the wrong committed by one of my blood and name. Nor did my responsibility end here. As I reflected on all the circumstances bound up with Valerian's story and my own, I saw how one moral obligation but entailed another, till my duty toward Valerian became my duty toward God and the world."

How sadly listened the blind lover to all this, every word, every syllable, a sentence to his hopes! But hear to the end he must.

"You may not perhaps realize," resumed Stephana, "why the fact of Valerian becoming my heir and Christina's should transform him into a power for good or evil. Think of the moral lever that a vast fortune must ever be, and never so much so as in these days. I can not put this tremendous engine into his hands and abandon him. He must be twofold my own creation. First, I set him among the lords of the earth; next, to give him a lordly soul. The heir of my worldly splendor must also be the inheritor of my aspirations."

"That Valerian will never be," retorted the listener, bitterly.

"You have yet more to hear; I shall convince you before

I have done," Stephana said, using a deeper persuasiveness and a more insinuating force. "For what are these subtle powers with which my friends accredit me? The plain meaning of such words is that I can in a very unusual degree fascinate people, bend them to a purpose in direct opposition to their own; but never to personal ends, mind. No element of my own individuality can enter into these influences. Swayed by a secret force stronger than any feeling, whether of love or joy, pity or sorrow, I move blindly, and am indeed blind as to the portion in store for myself. I can work no evil, only good, to any human being. Over my own destiny I have no power."

"But think for a moment, my own friend, this Valerian—"

"I know what you would say," interrupted Stephana, eagerly. "It is an earthen vessel. No flame of the spirit burns divinely through. I feel, I acknowledge it. Yet I must go on; if my own peace is to be sacrificed, I must obey. And reflect," she cried, a fine blush overspreading her pale features, and a tremor of reined-in enthusiasm swaying her voice; "will it not be a matchless piece of retribution, a superb ending to a sordid family story? The accumulated hoardings of generations, the spoils of worldling upon worldling, turned to noble uses in the hands of the outcast, the family honor vindicated by the disowned! Yes," she added, for a moment letting her hand rest on his, letting him feel the tears he could not see, "you who are my friend indeed, to whom I can thus unveil my inmost thoughts, you can not, you dare not, bid me draw back. The inner voice, the unspoken mandate, who may disobey?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER that confidence the friends still saw each other almost daily; for what so often brings like to like as common service for the higher good? London was now empty, as the phrase goes. August had come, and a sulphurous pall wrapped palace and Mansard, garden and river. Not a zephyr breathed freshly from any quarter of heaven, not a flower in blow but drooped under a pallid sun. Summer was there, but summer without sweetness, no verdurous space, no garden fragrance, no dewy shadows. Instead, languor and

heaviness, gloom and disease, where joy and deliciousness should be.

Joy and deliciousness were showered down abundantly on the fair face of the earth just then, but not on the city of four millions. Excessive heat and drought had induced one of those epidemics which occur from time to time as if to shake the comfortable faith in human adequacy. Skill and science seemed set at naught, and the dreaded disease that at first was "as a cloud no bigger than a man's hand" assumed by degrees stupendous and awful proportions, till it brooded, a doom and a portent, over the wide world of London. Now at first sight it would seem madness for two people to stay on calmly in a panic-stricken, pestilence place, when they might have betaken themselves any moment to Edens of freshness and repose. Men and women must die. What business had they with these obscure victims of a scourge that had mercy in it, since it decimated the helpless, the starving, and the needy? But Stephana and her friend thought otherwise; and whilst frightened parents were hurrying away their children, after the manner of hens at the appearance of a hawk, whilst idlers and pleasure-seekers were trying to drive away ennui in more attractive resorts, and the more sensitive were shutting their eyes as best they could to the disagreeableness of the world generally, Stephana and her friend staid on.

They were, indeed, indispensable to each other; and had not the very opportunity come for which Markham craved? Here, above all, was a crisis when the power he possessed and on which he prided himself could be put to really sublime uses. For the conscientious physician and the priest, do what they will, can not always infuse that courage into human hearts which is the best guarantee against impending evil. Soldiers tell us that the ball finds out the craven on the battle-field, and certain it is that the stout-hearted will often walk unscathed through deadliest infection.

Whilst Stephana, then, had hired a noble old suburban mansion, embowered in greenery, and turned it into a convalescent home for the sick, the blind story-teller was doing his best to keep up the spirits of those who were well. What may not a word do? and the stimulus of his melodic and bright calm eloquence came as a substitute for bracing sea-breezes, farm-yard sights and sounds, and all the beauty and freshness of the world that is not London. The sea, the the moor, the country, were but names to most of his hear-

ers, but all could laugh and weep at the stories he told them, now bringing fairy-land before wan little Smithfield children, now lifting the faint in spirit by some moving episode, now holding bereaved ones spell-bound by weird, romantic improvisation. Narrative, parable, allegory, dialogue, one and all he used by turns, with themes as various, and words ever new. Yet wherein lay the glammers? Was it the glow of feeling, the rapture of fancy, that enthralled his listeners or the mere mechanical part of the performance—exquisite training of voice, choice phraseology, inimitable elocution? All, yet none of these. The poor, pinched, toiling souls who listened to him were enchanted simply because it was the first time they had heard a story in their lives. The veil was lifted from the ideal world. A blind man had revealed to them the existence of things unseen, the quality of human life!

"Ah," he said, one evening, when alone with Stephana, after an unusually hard day, "we shall never live such hours as these any more. I am yours and you are mine by virtue of the mortal woes that have brought us together, but when the sun shines out from the clouds you will disappear, perhaps never to cross my path again."

"Have no fear on that score," Stephana said, with gentle consolation in her voice. "You are bound to cross my path whenever I have need of you. My wand will never be broken."

He shook his head. "You can not, like the loving god, be immortal one day and common clay the next. This marriage must drag you down, whether you will or no."

"Why should we talk of it?" cried Stephana, impatiently. "Why must men and women perpetually have love and marriage on their lips, as if the supreme end and purpose of existence were to love, to marry, and to die? You, at least, stand on higher ground, and take in wider horizons."

"Pardon me—a thousand times I ask your pardon," he said. "I will never, never breathe the subject again, if you promise me one little thing."

"A promise? What human being ever kept a promise? And why give it only to break?"

"No, you would not break it. Listen, then, my own friend, and accord the request or no. That is as you please. The name of Valerian in conjunction with yours shall never pass my lips again. Well, it is a small thing I ask. If—if"—he hesitated, painfully, and at last stammered out the words—

"if your magnanimous project, from any unforeseen cause, is never carried out, should you reject Valerian, should you feel the need of a trusty friend—as a friend only I venture to petition—summon me to your side by a wish."

"Why by anything so unsubstantial?" smiled Stephana. "Is there not paper and ink, a letter-carrier to boot? I will write to you with my proper hands."

"No, these are common means, and oft-times treacherous too! You could hardly write the thought of your mind, and it is the secret wish of your inmost heart I would have. No more nor less."

"And how could I be sure that it would reach you?" asked Stephana, still inclined to raillery. "The winds of heaven might blow it in another direction. Forgive me, dear friend: I am so sad at heart that I must be merry. These harrowing scenes I go through day after day, the ache of misery ever before me! Oh! ask me nothing to-day; only be kind to me, only help me with silent comfort. I must marry Valerian, but it is you I would fain have with me always."

Was not such a confession enough to satisfy any lover? Markham flushed from cheek to brow, but said no word more. The deep, unspoken sadness of Stephana's soul had penetrated his own. He felt at last lifted, and for a brief moment, to those serene spheres in which she lived and moved and had her being. He also must brace himself up to an act of supreme renunciation. For him also the best part of life was to give, asking no reward.

Stephana needed kindness indeed, and collectedness on her friend's part also, for she was weary in brain and body. A strange sight was that devoted pair, she so brave yet tender, he helpless, yet so strong, as day after day they set out on their errand of mercy. Stephana would inspect one fever-stricken court after another, to see that there was no orphan unhoused, no dead awaiting its last resting-place, no sick to be carried away. And whilst she made her rounds the blind man would find an audience, half a dozen children it might be, or two or three sad-hearted mothers with babes at their breast, or old men past work, past thieving, past beggary even; no matter whom, every one was as ready to listen as he to speak. These hollow-eyed, sallow-faced people had no religion. What religion could take hold of nature's starved, deadened, materialized by misery? But if they knew nothing of Christ and redemption, they could understand the gospel of magnanimous human kindness. They were aware of

that shining thing we call goodness, and it warmed them and almost gladdened them, if, indeed, misery can ever be glad.

Nor did Markham's serviceableness end here. In Stephana's mansion, filled now from cellar to attic with guests of the humbler sort, he found plenty of occupation. The poor valetudinarians lounging under the trees, or looking out for the first time in their lives on green lawns set with standard roses, sadly needed amusement, and there was the blind storyteller with his well-stored memory ever ready. Story after story they now heard for the first time. *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver*, the *Pilgrim's Progress* and Boccaccio, were laid under contribution, to say nothing of Prince Camaralzaman and his sixty brothers, Penelope's web, and last but not first, the champion of the windmills and knight of Dulcinea del Toboso. Wonderful to think how dull the world can be that possesses all these! So August and September passed, and with October ended their ordeal. Stephana and her companion came through it unscathed, so often will it happen that mere valiancy keepeth alive. They had been as soldiers on a battle-field in the thick of the fight, but a thousand bullets had passed them by.

“This is to be no long parting?” Markham asked, after a long confabulation on the eve of separation.

“True friends are never parted,” Stephana answered, reproachfully. “We shall often hear from each other; we shall bear each other in mind.”

She smiled, adding, with a mixture of playfulness and solemnity: “I have not forgotten your request. Whenever I need you there shall be neither sign nor letter. You will bend obsequious to my will.”

“Can I do otherwise?” he said, raising her hand to his lips. “And as soon as I have fulfilled the mission you have just intrusted to me, I may surely seek you unasked and unbidden?”

“Most surely,” Stephana made reply. “I shall look for you with impatience. The matter confided to you is one I have most at heart.”

“After Valerian.”

“After Christina and Valerian. I go to them now on a double quest, a twofold behest. How strange is life!”

“Strange and sad, yet sweet,” he said. “At least it would be so were there no Valerian.”

"Think no more of him, my friend. Be happy. Be my best helper."

Thus they parted, not lovers, certes, but how much more than friends!

CHAPTER XIX.

By the time ripe walnuts were falling from the trees in farm-house orchards, and over the brown fallow starlings held solemn conclave before flying south, Valerian's winter campaign was made out. One sunny sea-side rendezvous of winter idlers does as well as another for the purpose of mere pastime and epicurean pleasure in life, so he had brought his mistress to the same bright town nestled under Southern English hills. Miss Hermitage pronounced the house perfect, and the site bewitching, which it was indeed. Valerian's choice fell this time on a modest mansion perched on a right royal hill; grounds and garden must be of course insignificant in a place where every square inch of building land is worth its weight in gold to the speculators. But the view made up for everything. You might search the kingdom through and not find a more engaging prospect or heart-stirring panorama—fair green hills to the left, to the right, behind you, with all the signs of life and movement, church spires, garden-embowered villas, sloping meadows on which the cattle grazed even in the winter, and below the many-sailed, sparkling sea. All this and much more was to be seen from the house itself, whilst the very sense of altitude gave exhilaration. Were only a common prosaic world below, the tenant of these breezy heights must all the same have felt a strange charm in being thus lifted above it, and enabled to contemplate his fellow-creatures, mere pigmies, as they hurried about the day's business. But the scene was very gracious. The happy configuration of the soil, dimpled hills of tenderest green, joining hands with stern sweeps of gorse-clad moor, is heightened by a contrast with the sea—perpetual repose wedded to perpetual unrest. Yet the sea has oft-times a southern calm and suavity, and even on winter days bears on its tranquil bosom many a silvery sailed shallop that rests at anchor "idly as a painted ship upon a painted ocean."

Nor is life wholly ordinary and unpicturesque in this sweet place. You may still see in its ancient harbor sea-faring men

brown as Bedouins, and, like them, not translated into vulgarity by means of broadcloth and the chimney-pot. Wonderful indeed is their gear both on Sundays and working-days; for Sundays, provided the wind is not fair, new smocks dyed with the Indian catechu till they are bright as virgin copper, for plying their craft "all doth suffer a sea-change." There are to be seen slouched hats, trews, and petticoat—I know not by what other name to call them—of oil-skin, shiny and green as fishes' scales, with big Roundhead boots well seasoned by salt-water, the whole making up a formidable appearance, as of men bent on dire encounter with the elements. When there is no wind at all you may see one metamorphosis more. This time the fishermen wear tight-fitting garments of dark blue, having, with their fancifully shaped shrimping nets, an airy poetic appearance, although full of cold reality is the shrimper's life in winter. For these surroundings Miss Hermitage cared little, nor did she at all concern herself with Valerian's plans. She felt certain of being amused, and that sufficed. Just at present, however, she was enjoying a temporary lull, a pleasing interlude, devoid of surprise, but full of expectation. The curtain would soon be drawn. Meantime it was agreeable to sit awhile in subdued light, reining in one's powers of enjoyment. Stephana's arrival was the first event, and Miss Hermitage welcomed her warmly. "I do not understand you any more than if you had dropped from the planet Jupiter," she said, the first time they found themselves alone. "But I confess you divert me mightily. You are so unexpected in everything."

Stephana smiled one of those reproving little smiles of which Miss Hermitage was so far from divining the import. "And now I am going to be more unexpected than ever, Cousin Christina. I have something to tell you. I am going to marry Valerian."

"Valerian!—a man without a penny, without any position in the world, without—You are joking," replied Miss Hermitage. "And I am sure you never led anyone to suppose that you would ever marry again," she added, in an aggrieved tone. "What can have put such a thing into your head?" Stephana was silent. Could she ever make her cousin understand? The task seemed so arduous she knew not how to begin. "At least if you make the mistake of marrying a second time, do it to your own advantage," Miss Hermitage continued. "You are young, rich, handsome. You might marry any one."

Still Stephana held her peace, but Miss Hermitage could not misread the look of quiet decision on her face.

"And Valerian's marriage would be the greatest possible misfortune to me," she said. "Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, I have thought of all these things. But I can not do otherwise. I must act up to my conscience."

"Really, Stephana, I am driven to think that you are going out of your mind."

"Is conscientious behavior so very rare, then?" laughed Stephana, bitterly. "But hear me out, Christina. I am bound to explain my motives to you. I will first say that two years ago, when we were at Naples together, Valerian led me to believe that only his deplorable position hindered him from coming forward. How could he, indeed? The thing was not possible."

"Well, what has happened to make it so? I have told you all along that I should never make Valerian my heir. A fair provision he will have, and the rest goes to charity," retorted Miss Hermitage. "If you marry Valerian, you will do it with your eyes open."

"But it is just because Valerian is so unfortunate that I have determined to do all that in me lies to make reparation," Stephana went on, quietly and resignedly, her mind made up to force an explanation upon her cousin, no matter at what cost to both. "Do you not see," she added, with almost painful emphasis, "how we are beholden to him by very reason of the wrongs he has endured?"

"I leave him a thousand a year. A man must be an idiot to grumble when thus provided for. I do think, my dear Stephana, Valerian's wrongs, as you call them, are for the most part imaginary. We have adopted him into the family; the facts of his birth concern nobody."

"At least they concern himself," Stephana made reply, again with extreme bitterness underlying her sweet voice; "and because they are shameful they concern all the world." She glowed with passionate indignation as she went on: "Has it never occurred to you that it is just the sins of which Valerian is the victim that make our modern civilization a mockery and society hideous? For my part, I never meet a work-house child but I blush for the depravity of my fellows. And note the law of retribution! We bring these unhappy beings without conscience into the world, and without conscience they turn upon us, vindicating themselves by violence

and crime. What but chance hindered Valerian from being one of these abandoned ones?”

Miss Hermitage looked annoyed, even disturbed, yet unconvinced. “All this may be true,” she said, evidently wishing to narrow the discussion to a point; “but I fail to see what they have to do with your proposal to marry him.”

“Everything,” answered Stephana, quietly. Then with a fine blush of enthusiasm she said: “I am rich, and he has nothing. In making over to him my wealth I give him the means of combating these social evils. He, the victim of shame and sin, shall stand up to plead the cause of others similarly ill-used, the apostle of a higher code of morality.”

Miss Hermitage made sarcastic retort, though she had seemed to wince whilst listening.

“Throw your money into the sea if you like, my dear Stephana. It is your own, and none can say you nay. But, depend on it, as long as the world stands there will be vice and virtue. It is a law of nature.”

The glow faded from Stephana’s face, and the tremor of fine feeling no longer thrilled her voice, as she replied, in her turn biting and sarcastic: “So I dare say the Pacific islanders thought when they made meals of their captives. And we are not so far ahead of them as we think.”

“Well, we are not cannibals, thank Heaven! But reflect for a moment. You would be very unhappy with Valerian; you two are not in the least suited to each other. Let him be. Let everything be. It would be so much better both for your health and spirits.”

Stephana sat still, silent yet remonstrant. Miss Hermitage continued, with positively a caressingness in her hard voice: “I should be really sorry to see you make another mistake—I should indeed. These handsome notions of doing good never come to anything, my dear. We must just eat our bread and butter from day to day, and leave the world as we find it.”

“Has Valerian’s fate never troubled you, then, Christina?” asked Stephana, looking with indescribable pathos into her cousin’s eyes.

“You see that I have provided for him; I could not do less,” was the quick, irritated answer. “But now do let me hear what you have been doing in London all this time, and the place reeking with fever. I trust you have made your will. The life of a rash, impulsive person like yourself is not worth an hour’s purchase.”

Thus the conversation ended. Had Stephana succeeded in making her motives plain? Was Christina any nearer her inmost thoughts and painful convictions? She could not tell. She only knew that her cousin could never be brought to return to the topic, and almost seemed, by such avoidance, to shun her company.

CHAPTER XX.

VALERIAN needed all his much-praised tact, collectedness, and discrimination to extricate himself from his strange position. Arthura, his betrothed, his only love, in the house; Stephana, his would-be benefactress, close by, and alike the love of the one and the magnanimity of the other to be held a dead secret, locked up in his own breast as if indeed they were not. For if Arthura must not know of Stephana's benign intentions, still less must Stephana suspect Arthura's girlish passion. He had kept silence. The time was gone by for any gentle unravelment of the threads. Come what would, they must now be rudely cut asunder; perhaps tomorrow, perhaps next year; no matter when, so long as it was not too late.

Thus he reasoned, and certainly such a decision was convenient, if hardly high-minded or wise. Nothing could have been more uncomfortable to all three than an explanation just then. Arthura must straightway forfeit her really handsome position. Stephana's generous schemes would be nipped in the bud, and his own worldly prospects suffer shipwreck. Miss Hermitage would never forgive the deception, never, never, never, repeated Valerian to himself, condoning one crooked line of conduct by another. And having once persuaded himself that it was inevitable, that he was thus acting because to act otherwise was impossible, he finally took refuge, as most of us do under similar circumstances, in a kind of fatality. Unlucky chances were playing with him. He was the sport of misadventure. He must for the time being just let the Fates do with him as they would. For the time being, reasoned Valerian. He had not the remotest idea of playing traitor to his better nature. He loved Arthura more dearly than ever, and would not suffer himself to drift into infidelity to her. When the crisis came he should give up everything for her sake; but meantime there was no cri-

sis. He could enjoy the suavity of Stephana's friendship in the sweet consciousness of Arthura's love. And last but not least he was not breaking with his best friend, his cousin Christina. To give her up, indeed, just now when she so urgently needed his services, would be the acme of human ingratitude. To have deceived her in the first instance and to go on deceiving her now was not only a duty, but a piece of downright kindness, Valerian finally said to himself, one sophistry, like one tortuous act, being implicitly bound up with another.

And indeed all went very smoothly, Arthura helping him with her proud reserve, Stephana no less so with her quiet, almost sisterly kindness. Kinder no woman could be to any man, but it was the kindness that has no sentiment in it—the kindness a lover would have resented. Those steady sympathetic glances, those affectionate signs of interest, that friendly serviceableness, might mean anything but love. No wonder that Arthura was disarmed. It needed no woman's insight, nor man's either, to see that as far as Valerian was concerned Stephana was absolutely insensible to deeper feeling. She might like him, and that cordially. But she saw him come and go with perfect composure. She was the same whether he was absent or sitting by her side. Flattering, however, as might be this outward calm and fancied security to Valerian, Stephana wanted to touch firmer ground. Life to her meant no mere living from hand to mouth, no patchwork of good intentions and vague purposes, still less a raree-show got up for pastime and clapping of the hands. She must live consistently, having definite objects before her ever, and forcing all minor circumstance and endeavor to one central thought. So having come to the conclusion that Valerian's future was matter of first concernment, she could not let day after day slip idly by. Nor was opportunity wanting. They were often thrown together; it rested with herself whether or no they should be alone. She had only to command an interview. She preferred to seize upon chance, and one day when Valerian called, little prepared for such an invitation, she bade him stay.

"Take a chair," she said, quite collectedly, almost coldly; "I have something to say to you."

Now Valerian had been quite thrown off his guard by Stephana's cousinly, nay, sisterly behavior for weeks past, and almost driven to believe that such blissful uncertainty might last forever. There was no reason why Stephana

should speak out to-day any more than yesterday, and that day twelvemonth any more than to-morrow. When, therefore, quite suddenly and unlooked-for came such a behest, he felt too much taken by surprise to frame any resolution at all. And again the beguiling sophism came to his aid. He was the sport of circumstance. Chance must do with him as it would. At first Stephana's confidences were very re-assuring. Valerian listened, growing easier in mind and more courageous every moment.

"Valerian," she began, "I wish you would tell me in all frankness whether you have any sympathy with those causes for which our cousin Constantine has battled so stoutly! Do they as much as interest you?"

"To be perfectly sincere," he said, speaking readily, and without any more secret misgiving, "I have always regarded myself as a nobody, to whom nothing was of any concern, except, indeed, the matter of meat, drink, and the where-withal to be clothed."

They both smiled after friendliest fashion. Such straightforwardness pleased Stephana, and seemed a guarantee of higher qualities.

"Have you never wished to use such powers as you possess on a wider, more ambitious scale? You are variously gifted. You should make a figure in the world."

Valerian laughed sarcastically. "Some men might do so certainly, and under the same conditions. I am afraid that I lack magnanimity. What right has society to expect anything of me? I say to myself and go my ways unconcerned."

"But hardly content, I am sure," Stephana said, the underlying bitterness of Valerian's speech interesting, touching her. It was the first time that they had ever verged upon a confidence. She wanted to probe this nature hitherto deemed by her—who could say how unjustly?—unimpressionable even to shallowness.

"Content is not perhaps the word, but another that may shock you more—indifferent. Had I not long ago schooled myself into indifference, life must have been intolerable to me. Most men similarly placed would have recourse to the same philosophy."

Stéphana glanced at her cousin's agreeable physiognomy, no traces of silent anguish on the smooth brow, no signs of inner conflict in the steadily beaming eye. All was careless, sunny, youthful; yet how often may outward aspect betray rather than reveal the hidden soul? None could tell what

Valerian might have suffered in secret. Very kindly and insinuatingly she took up the thread.

“I should have felt much for you, but I mistook your light-heartedness for insensibility. If, as you say, then, your present life were intolerable but for such indifference, why not change it? I own I have blamed your passiveness.”

“Ambitiousness may be acquired,” Valerian said, determined not to pose—at any rate and at all hazards to appear no other than he was in Stephana’s eyes. “It would be hard indeed if I could not do better than I am doing now.”

“Perhaps better for yourself and your worldly prospects,” Stephana made answer, with appreciable disapproval in her voice. “I was hardly thinking of personal objects.”

“Hear me!” cried Valerian, giving way to a sudden burst of genuine feeling. “I have never for a moment dreamed of being satisfied with myself. But there was gratitude binding me to Christina, and she will have this kind of service, and no other. It is hardly my fault if I am a perpetual master of drawing-room ceremonies.”

“Poor Valerian!” said Stephana, smiling, once more all sympathetic concern and benevolence. The herculean tasks that fell to his hands daily struck her as new facts of good augury. “The skill and energy you put into your present career might really accomplish great things,” she went on, thoughtfully, “if you would only be guided.”

Then turning round and looking him straight in the face, without a faltering of the sweet voice, a tinge of carnation in the pale cheek, she said, quite naturally and calmly:

“Will you give me a conscience in exchange for my wealth? Long ago, when we were in Rome, you hinted of your wishes to me, and spoke of the differences in our position as a barrier between us. I see the matter in another light. The sacrifice is to be all on your side. I have nothing but unearned worldly fortune to bestow, but *you*—”

She gazed at him steadfastly, and added, with a more subtle insinuation in her voice: “What are you not bidden to give up? Ease, acquired habits of life, and perhaps romance? You must have dreamed, like other men, of winning some woman’s love, if not mine, for I can only give you friendship. No deeper feeling: I have said it. If, then, a single conviction causes you to hesitate, be true to it. Be what you will, only true to yourself.”

Thrilled by this noble appeal, Valerian yet listened, unable to open his lips, and such outward impassibility might well

deceive a less unsuspecting looker-on than Stephana. For she was far as could be from imputing crookedness or cowardice to this matter-of-fact, commonplace, yet well-meaning and much suffering Valerian. It seemed to her only natural that having at one time, hopelessly as he thought, aspired to her hand, he should be somewhat overcome by the sudden realization of his wishes. Silence on his part could mean no more nor less than excessive surprise, not without a touch of gratitude. And nothing he could say was so becoming and convenient as silence. His thanks she did not want, his love-making she could not have. They could, must be, only the best possible friends.

And Valerian seemed but to put her thoughts into words when at last he got out, hesitatingly enough, "You are my best friend in the wide world!" He paused, glanced round him nervously, as if he feared that even in Stephana's boudoir might lurk eavesdroppers, then added, "How can I ever thank you?"

Was he on the verge of a confidence? Had Stephana's singleness of purpose infected him? He hardly knew; he only felt conscious of a vague feeling akin to remorse, and of a fluttering impulse to tell her all. Had she been a common woman he would have done so. Stephana's very noble-mindedness awed while it disturbed him. He felt that already he was deserving of her scorn, and her generosity he was unable to measure.

"It will be my turn to thank if you do all, nay, the half of what I would fain impose on you," she replied, smiling graciously. "Think well before you accept me as your task-mistress."

Then she held out her beautiful hand with such an air of queenly condescension and yet womanly affectionateness that he could not choose but raise it to his lips.

So their interview ended.

CHAPTER XXI.

FOR the time being Stephana's projects were to be matter of family talk only, not a hint reaching any one outside the circle, excepting Colette.

"I never withhold anything from Colley," Miss Hermitage said to Stephana; "and she keeps my secrets, like my keys,

from the rest of the house." Then she added, rather maliciously: "If once your wild schemes get abroad, there will be an end of all my enjoyment. Valerian's accomplishments as a flirt are worth any money to me, but when his fate is determined he will become quite uninteresting."

"Not to yourself, I hope?" answered Stephana.

"I am no hypocrite. I confess I think you had better leave him as he is. He is an admirable man of the world. 'Twill be a clumsy job to turn him into anything else."

Such sharp little speeches were all Miss Hermitage's comments on the subject, and Stephana willingly let it drop. Nothing happened from day to day to arouse Arthura's suspicion, even had she been on the watch. But no thought of a lapse, much less of deliberate treachery, on Valerian's part ever crossed the girl's artless mind. She relied on him, on love—but another name for her Valerian—as implicitly as she trusted the loving creatures at home. Valerian could no more betray her or grow indifferent to her than Steppie and Walter, Benjamine and Baby. And was she not more to him even than to these?

No. Arthura's secret heaviness of soul and silent tears shed in the sanctuary of her chamber were not for Valerian. His tenderness, his pride, his chivalrous devotion, seemed sweet green resting-places in a turbulent world. What disquieted her was the daily and hourly necessity for concealment. Valerian would sit opposite to her at the dinner-table, would give her his arm on the terrace, yet she must not smile at him naturally, or utter a single sentiment in harmony with her thoughts. The raillery that had been so easy, the feigned disaccord of former days, the mock quarrelling, were now hateful, even impossible, to her. She could be outwardly cold and collected, she could no longer assume wounded self-love or coquettish indignation.

"Do, my dear, sweet girl, be more like yourself," Valerian would remonstrate. "I know the ordeal is a hard one, but think of me. Is my own task light?"

"I am sure you love me, Valerian. Do you not?" asked the proud girl, bringing her eyes on a level with his own as if to look him through and through.

"If you are sure of it, why put the question?" replied the lover, kissing the beautiful eyes. "But we have only a minute to ourselves. For my sake—your own Valerian's sake—summon up courage. Be bright, gay, unconcerned."

Arthura shook her head sadly.

"Where is your high spirit, your self-confidence? Think, my love, of the storm that would break on my head if once the truth leaked out."

"Oh, Valerian, we can not always play a part! Every day of double-dealing but makes matters worse for us. Let me tell Stephana. She would be our advocate."

"Promise me that you will breathe no word of this to Stephana," was Valerian's quick, irritated answer.

"I made you a promise for once and for all," the girl said, proudly. "Never fear that I shall break it. Only let me go."

"Will you force me into calling you unreasonable?" he said, and once more they were for a moment safe from observation. He kissed her eyes, not seeing the tears. Arthura never let him see her weep. He could not understand; he would only chide. And having found that he had no sympathy with these misgivings and self-questionings, she resolved henceforth to conceal them. Whenever by chance they afterward found themselves alone, she was composed, unremonstrant, self-centered, the fact of having to hide her feelings from her lover making her task doubly hard. Hitherto when by chance they were alone for five minutes his smile of encouragement would smooth away care for days to come. Forced back upon herself, shut out alike from ruth and counsel, no wonder her step lost its elasticity and her eye its luster! Before her mistress and benefactor she still kept up a show of gayety, but it was the merest gloss and counterfeit only. The young heart was heavy, the high spirit drooped.

The sea consoled her. When a wild wind and a spurting rain kept the lazy world within, she would steal out-of-doors and hasten down to the shore. The sea has its moods, gracious, weird, winsome; none for an aching human heart like its fury. Arthura grew calm and brave listening to these thunderous breakers, wave after wave dashing against the sea-wall, or, like a column of white flame, leaping it and every other barrier. So lowering the heavens, so blurred the visible world that there seemed nothing else for the eye to rest upon but the gleaming, glittering spray, white and shining in the universal gloom. On days less stormy, when the wind no longer thundered, but blew its bugle note clear and shrill as the kittiwake's cry, and the sun shone clear upon a turbulent green sea, there would be a matchless spectacle. For of every tenth wave—the Roman wave—as the pyramidal waters broke upon the shore, the sun made a lovely little

rainbow. One after another might be seen ; a dozen before the tide went down. And exquisite was it to see the flakes of foam driven hither and thither in company of the sea-birds—sprites seemed they, and as much alive as the birds—now sparkling for a moment on the brown sands, now vanishing over the house-tops, playing their part for a moment on the beauteous scene.

Then there were the quiet days of mist and pearliness, when all day long a brooding calm wrapped the devastation of yesterday, and these also were good for aching hearts. Again and again a mild sun would try to shine out, and at last, pensive yet lovely, illumined the far-off sea. No glory or warmth elsewhere, only in one direction, and for a brief span, a gentle radiance in one spot of the heavens, and a single track of light upon the dull sad ocean.

The sea, then, consoled Arthura as it has done many another, she knew not why. Is it a portent, a prophecy, we listen to?—rebuke or upholding, blessing or malison? We can not understand. We can only hearken and be hushed. Ineffable voice, matchless monitor, yestreen a psalmody, to-day a clarion blast, music, wonder, and mystery ever!

There was only one person as yet who divined that Arthura had a care. Stephana’s quick perceptions were not to be deceived, and she tried to win the girl’s confidence, to insinuate herself into her affections—no hard task under other circumstances. From the first Arthura had felt the subtle charm of Stephana’s personal influence, and in the early days of their acquaintance had yielded to the seduction, but now she must do so no longer. From every fresh overture on Stephana’s part she drew back more and more reticent and undemonstrative. At last Stephana determined to speak out. She was Arthura’s senior, her superior also by virtue of position : she might well take the initiative. The pair happened to be alone one afternoon in Stephana’s own house, Arthura having gone thither with a message from Miss Hermitage. The girl delivered it hurriedly, even brusquely ; then made for the door.

“Nay, stay with me for a little while,” Stephana said, taking her visitor’s hand and leading her to an easy-chair. “It is seldom I see you alone now, and for days past I have had something on my mind to say to you.”

Arthura, flushed, impatient, almost irritated, faltered out an excuse. She could not stay, she murmured. Another time she might be less hurried. Then, unable any longer to

confront Stephana's mild yet inquisitorial gaze, she added, with a burst of girlish passion: "I am not happy? That is what you would say, I know."

Stephana made her sit down, and still holding her hand, looked at her anxiously.

"It is not hard to understand," blurted out Arthura, torn to pieces by inner conflict, wanting yet not daring to divulge all, resolved at any cost to herself that Valerian's secret should be kept. "I am alone here; every one is kind to me, but I am alone."

"And your heart is elsewhere; you have little brothers and sisters?" said Stephana, brimming over with sweet womanly kindness.

"I have a home," was the almost vindictive reply.

"You would, of course, be there; that is simple enough," Stephana said, gently, little dreaming how each benign word but made Arthura's case more desperate. The girl felt as if she must unburden herself, must take counsel of this angelically kind monitress. Why, oh, why had Valerian bound her to a promise so hard to keep? Once her sorrows wept out on Stephana's bosom, and she felt that she could go on fulfilling her daily tasks courageously.

"I must stay with Miss Hermitage," cried Arthura; "she is generous as a queen. The children depend upon me, and I have other claims."

"It is true my cousin is very handsome in all her dealings. It might be hard for you to find another avocation so well paid. Yet"—Stephana paused and leaning forward, kissed the girl's cheek with an air of sweetest encouragement—"I have often thought how delightful it would be for me to have you in London if this intractable cousin would be cozened into parting with you. I am rich as well as she. You would be near your own people. You could help me in many ways."

"I dare not think of it," the girl said, throwing her arms round Stephana's neck, melted at last to tears that well-nigh betrayed her. "If I might only be near you always, and make a friend of you! But I must not, I dare not; I am bound by a promise."

Stephana at once thought of Miss Hermitage and her jealous fear of losing Arthura so far back as a year ago. She could not press the girl's confidences; she could only say little caressing words of cheer and encouragement.

"Let us hope that some day my cousin may get tired of

you," she said, playfully. "And meantime I may surely be your friend."

Arthura smiled, a sad, unassenting smile. "No," she cried, with sudden passion, "you must not know, you can not understand. Let me go, Stephana. There is wizardry in your eyes. If I stay I shall yield to it, and break a solemn promise."

What could Stephana do but let her go? Not a single thought of Valerian crossed her mind. Arthura's secret, as she naturally supposed, referred to Miss Hermitage only.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHEN we hire wit and esprit into our service we have surely as good a right to entertainment as to irreproachable dinners from the Cordon Bleu presiding over our kitchen. 'Tis all in the bond. We pay handsomely, and demand only our money's worth. So reasoned Miss Hermitage, who felt no less aggrieved the first time she found Arthura's conversation flavorless than if the chef had sent up roast quail without its orthodox envelope of freshly plucked vine leaf. The girl was bound to be gay, piquant, quick at repartee, ready with playful sallies. It was incumbent upon her to vanquish Valerian in sportive quarrel, to do a little sparring with any one else who might be present, above all to be the sprite, the mischievous elf, the Puck, of Miss Hermitage's dressing-room. Every night Arthura had assisted at her mistress's disrobing. "The best part of the day for me," Miss Hermitage would say, for Arthura's animal spirits and rich vein of fun were then at their height. She jested, she mimicked, she took her dearest Gossip to task as if it were Steppie herself; she was diverting in a thousand different ways, and simply because she could not help it. Miss Hermitage amused her no less than she amused Miss Hermitage. This odd love of familiarity, this relish of satire, even when some foible of her own was the object, this predilection for youth and vivacity, were all new to the girl, and made the study of Miss Hermitage's character a perpetual enigma.

For some time Arthura had realized that fictitious gayety is but a poor substitute for spontaneous animal spirits, and only awaited opportunity to tell the truth, or at least a part

of the truth. Was Miss Hermitage beginning to see through the veil? All doubts were soon set at rest.

"Arthura," said Miss Hermitage, coming into her room one day, with an irritated almost injured look, "I want you to go and stay with my cousin Constantine for a month—will you?"

"Certainly, if you wish it," Arthura replied, she not showing reluctance, Miss Hermitage thought, rather relief. But soon followed an expression of dismay. What was such a sentence but covert dismissal, and what was dismissal but ruin? She discerned clearly enough that the visit to Mr. Constantine was only a pretext, and that when once she had quitted her protector's roof she should never be invited to return to it. Arthura was not slow in reading physiognomies, and to-day plainer than any words she read on Miss Hermitage's, "You no longer amuse me."

"That is settled, then. He is very lonely in London, and sadly needing a reader. Will you go to-day?"

Again Arthura assented, though a deep blush dyed her cheek. Valerian was away! She must go without a word of farewell.

"It is only a visit, so there is no occasion for packing-up and good-byes," Miss Hermitage went on, in the same irritated manner. "Well, I will go and telegraph to Constantine, and meantime you can make your preparations."

Thus ended the interview, and Miss Hermitage so contrived matters that there were no other explanations or leave-takings. Even Colette had been sent on an errand that would detain her till after Arthura's departure. Valerian away, Stephana away! Such an opportunity might not soon occur again, and although Miss Hermitage always carried out her intentions, she preferred to do so without remark, much less remonstrance. Arthura was not especially wanted just now, and she had done Mr. Constantine a good turn. This was the only light she should throw on the subject. It was her own affair. No one had the slightest ground for making comments. Arthura, left to herself, sat for a few minutes like one in a dream. She was going, and going where? Into a world shut off from Valerian's, a world in which they could hold hardly more communication with each other than if they were in separate planets. She must never write to him, and never see him. If he wrote, indeed, it could only be by stealth and in strictest secrecy. She should learn nothing of his doings from day to day, and who could tell

what else might happen still further to divide, perhaps to estrange?

Oh! this hateful crookedness! Had she only rebelled against it from the first! Then all might have been well, at least with Valerian and herself, and what mattered the rest? She could always earn enough to maintain the children, with the help of Steppie's tiny income. Anything, anything in the wide world but crookedness! thought Arthura, dashing away a few passionate tears before she put her gowns together. Hard as was the service exacted of her by Miss Hermitage, it was only herself she reproached now. And Valerian! on him also would inevitably fall a share of the retribution.

Meantime Miss Hermitage, chuckling over her move, thus communicated it to her one confidante in the world.

"Arthura was too good to last, as I feared. I have sent her away."

The timid little Frenchwoman looked up, too dismayed to speak.

"You goose, Colley! Nothing has happened, of course. The girl has been moody of late, and so I have dispatched her to Constantine. That is all."

Colette still looked the remonstrance she did not speak.

"Constantine has been begging me to let him have Arthura as reader for months to come. He will think I send her out of pure generosity. Is it not a prime joke? On my word, Colley, you look as if I had just uttered some abominable sentiment! I am only doing two people a good turn. It will never enter Constantine's head that I wanted to get rid of Arthura, and for the present I pay her salary all the same."

"Why should you want to get rid of her?" asked Colette.

"The fact is she is moody. You know high spirits and depression are twins. It is only meek, purring creatures like yourself who are the same to-day, to-morrow, and forever."

"Some little home trouble was at the bottom of it, or the poor child may have had an occasional fit of toothache. We have all our ailments," urged Colette. She played the part of intercessor now as hopefully as if she had not undergone constant checking for fifty years.

"What a child you are! As if, at my time of life, I could afford to be depressed by other people's toothache! You are as innocent as if you had just walked out of Noah's ark. I repeat, I shall deal handsomely by the girl. She is on a

visit to Constantine, and we shall see what we can do with her next."

"I was fond of that girl," sighed Colette.

"I confess she amused me," Miss Hermitage said, dryly. "But there was something wrong of late. Perhaps she has fallen in love."

Colette looked unsuggestive.

"Valerian is not handsome, but women find him agreeable. She may have liked him at the last. But some day or other he is to marry Stephana—I am sure of it—so a love match for him is out of the question."

"Might not that be a love match?"

"My dear Colley, you are innocence itself. Now just watch the pair together, Stephana and Valerian. They are as indifferent to each other as it is possible for two people to be."

"Then they should not marry," replied Colette, romantic as in the days of her girlhood.

"That seems to me the very best possible reason for marrying," Miss Hermitage made cynical reply. "They will thus be saved from disappointment afterward."

"Oh, Christina, why may not men and women sometimes love each other with a perfect love, and marriage sometimes be happiness unalloyed?"

"Because no one has set the fashion, I suppose," retorted Miss Hermitage. "Except in novels. We get plenty of perfection there."

"That is why I adore them," Colette said, warmly. "I like to think of married folks living together in utter bliss, like John Halifax and Ursula."

"Twaddle-de-dee! But you're like the rest of 'em," Miss Hermitage made uncouth reply. "When will women write, not of what might, could, would, or should be, but of what Is!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

MISS HERMITAGE was deceiving herself when she fondly imagined that Mr. Constantine would be taken in by her little device. Mr. Constantine had never been taken in by a woman during his life—a fact that speaks volumes for his perspicacity. As he conned the telegram announcing Ar-

thura's arrival his face presented a curious study. It was as good as reading an old Greek epigram to watch it.

“Well, what's in the wind now?” he soliloquized, replacing his spectacles. “The old hussy can not be jealous of her pretty handmaid! But I'll be civil, of course. Why, she must have sent me a third dozen of Madeira this year. Heaven bless her! And as to the girl, I am delighted. The old harridan—Lord, have mercy on me!—can not have scratched her pretty eyes out; and these readers one gets through advertisements are all so ugly—so—so unpardonably ugly! How many have I had to see? A score, I am sure; and there were not the makings of a comely woman among them all, not a pair of eyes worth looking at, not a hand or foot worth mentioning, and the rest of a piece. Why do ugly women put in advertisements? The *Times* should forbid it, or at least keep a special column for them. Well, now for a note to the old heathen, God bless her!”

Accordingly Mr. Constantine sat down and penned the following note—a model of the lost art of calligraphy, not a *t* uncrossed, not an *i* without its dot, every letter formed as carefully as if written on parchment to last forever:

“RUSSELL SQUARE, GUY FAWKES DAY, 18—.

“KINDEST, BEST OF COUSINS,—Tottering on the verge of the grave, perhaps never more to enjoy your bounteous hospitality [that will bring me a hamper of game], I sit down with trembling fingers to thank you for the last sign of kindness I have any right to expect at your hands. [I should not be surprised if that brings me a fourth dozen of Madeira. Nothing makes people feel so amiable to you as the prospect of losing you forever.] For you, my dear Christina, are yet in store, as I fondly hope and believe, many years of health and benevolence. [That will please the old pagan, I know.] But the only news you can now expect to hear of me is that I have taken leave of the world, and all those I cling to so fondly, forever. We have had our little squabbles—what relatives have not? But this dear girl shall be, like the Indian boy from Titania to her Oberon, a token of final reconcilment. When I am beyond reach of benignities it will console you to think what a sacrifice you made in order to cheer my declining days. [Had she not wanted to get rid of Miss Pretty Eyes, I might have cried mine out to have her.] But no more. Generosity is ever its own reward, and I always said you had a heart of gold.

['Tis of flint, but no matter.] Heaven bless and reward you, my dear Christina, is the prayer of your affectionate cousin and devoted servant,

"CONSTANTINE-GOSSIP-HERMITAGE."

The letter sealed and sent off to the post, Mr. Constantine threw himself back in his arm-chair to rest after the exertion. After dozing a little, with a smile upon his face, he rang the bell.

"Are the Pretty Eyes come?" he asked of his housekeeper—starchness and primness itself, although accustomed to her master's humor.

"The—what, if you please, sir?"

"My good Bumstead, Miss Hermitage has sent me a reader from the country—a young lady, who, if she possesses no other qualification in the world, has beautiful eyes. I trust they will be a source of gratification to you."

"Rather of sackcloth and potsherds, sir," Mrs. Bumstead made reply. "What are eyes in woman but a bait for Satan?"

"Well, you shall gird yourself with sackcloth and sit in potsherds, whilst I look at Miss Arthura's eyes."

"Oh Lord, sir—at your age!"

"My dear woman, at my age one may do anything. But you will make this young lady comfortable, won't you?"

"One must do one's duty by the Rebeccas as well as the Leahs, sir."

"Aptly said, my good Bumstead. I hope, however, you do not really think the worse of yourself for being comely and well-favored. I am sure, now, if I had seen you—well, say thirty years ago, I should have kicked Bumstead down-stairs."

Mrs. Bumstead blushed, and became amiable in a moment. "Dear sir, how funny you are! Joking to the last! But I had better go and prepare for the young lady."

"By all means. Dear me! it will be dull for her, I fear—Russell Square in November, after the south and the sea."

"Humph, sir! Is a girl to be dancing jigs all day just because she came into the world with eyes twinkling like ship lights?"

"True! true! I wish I could dance a jig with her, nevertheless; and I am sure, Bumstead, though I speak hypothetically, you have a foot and ankle turned for the dance—haven't you, now?"

"Really, sir," Mrs. Bumstead simpered—"how you joke! And at your time of life too!"

"A joke is better than a curse, anyhow," Mr. Constantine replied. "And a neat foot and ankle in a woman is better than a virtuous mind."

"Oh, sir!" Mrs. Bumstead cried, and forthwith took her departure.

A couple of hours later emerged from the fog and the outer gloom a very apparition of sparkling youth and vivacity—Arthura's self, her old self. Not a cloud upon the frank brow, not a care in the bright eyes. To Arthura, indeed, this dreary, antiquated house in what was yet London two generations ago seemed no prison, but a sweet place of liberty. The chains had fallen; her spirit was no longer confined; she could breathe the air of unconstraint and reality.

"I am overjoyed to come," were her first words.

"Come, now," said the old man, "no indiscretion, but just an inkling of the truth. Were you tired of that—of my cousin, or was the old—she tired of you?"

Arthura spoke out for once and for all:

"I could not amuse her any longer, sir. That is the beginning and the end of the matter. But you want no amusing, I am sure," she added, perusing him with girlish candor and admiration.

"That is a very pretty compliment, although not so intended, I dare say. But, truth to tell, my dear young lady, I do want amusing. A man may replace his twentieth sweetheart. What can console him for the loss of his eyesight?"

"I will be eyes, ears, everything," answered Arthura, gayly.

"And a memory too, upon occasions, I'll warrant. Your business will be, however, to read to me. But I am strange and fantastical in my habits—a very owl, consorting with ghosts and darkness, and only alert when others drowse. Are you wedded to midnight sleep, my dear?"

"I dare say I could sleep as well at mid-day, sir."

"Then I trust that you will not be too much startled by my programme. The fact is, my reader's task begins at midnight, and ends—well, sometimes quickly enough, always before the crowing of the cock. Except at that ghostly hour, then, you are free. I have a secretary and man of business to help me with my correspondence for an hour or two in the forenoon. But 'tis only the sweet voice of woman that can send me to sleep when once I assume my night-cap."

"And I may do what I like all day?" asked Arthura, hardly believing in her good fortune.

"Precisely. A friend or two step in for a chat in the after-

noon. I can not sit down to a formal dinner table; and although, when agreeable to you, I shall like your company occasionally in the evening, 'tis not in the bond. Do what you please in the daytime, except to practice music and singing over my head."

"I neither play nor sing," said Arthura, modestly.

"How I wish I had a thousand pounds to leave you in my will! A girl who has not driven her relations mad by perpetually strumming the Pathetic Sonata, who has not proved herself the Nemesis of her next-door neighbors by trying to sing—Give me your hand, my dear; I love you."

"Should not every girl know these things, sir?" asked Arthura.

"In a more commodious planet, my dear; not in this. We are all too near one another. But now repose yourself to-day and to-night, and to-morrow evening at twelve of the clock you shall be summoned."

"Indeed, sir—"

"To-morrow," Mr. Constantine said, waving his small white hand, "with the ghosts, the specters, the wraiths, the phantoms, and all the nightly powers that be."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PRECISELY at twelve of the clock Mrs. Bumstead ushered Arthura with due form and ceremony into Mr. Constantine's bed-chamber, there to receive an impression she never forgot as long as she lived. If he were marvelous to look at by daylight, his complexion then wearing the smoothness and luster of polished ivory, how was the effect heightened by the dim light of shaded lamps and rich shadows of crimson bed-hangings? Under a spacious canopy lay Mr. Constantine, not vulgarized by the orthodox night-cap of our grandfathers, but having for head-gear a finely spun shawl or cufiah of Oriental silk, twisted round his head turban-wise, and showing gorgeous interweavings of scarlet and gold. His night-gown, if it is permitted to describe such a garment, was no less peculiar, having an outer covering of soft Persian silk, warm in color as the turban, whilst the lining was of finest linen, with elaborately embroidered wrist-bands and collar, and underneath this was yet another and a still finer and

softer garment, worn for comfort, and not for grace. Thus beautifully appareled, Mr. Constantine might well receive midnight visitors without scruple, and being accustomed to see one fair reader after another, offered no apology when Arthura made her appearance. Her own dress was too striking to be passed by without comment. She wore a loose gown of crimson satin, wadded after the fashion of the olden time—a gown so simple, so stately, and withal so matronly that whilst it added indescribably to her beauty, it also lent added years and gravity. This sumptuous woman was surely no mere girl of character and spirit, but a tragedy queen.

"Place yourself quite at your ease," said Mr. Constantine; "and—let me see—what can we have to-night? Read me the titles of the books before you, my dear."

Arthura read: "*Vathek; The Bride of Lammermoor; The Mysteries of Paris.*"

"Ah," sighed Mr. Constantine, "would there were a score such! I love a story, but I never can find one nowadays. Your writers have no imagination. Yet hath this age produced one novel. You must know it, my dear—the book writ by the parson's daughter?"

"*Jane Eyre?*"

"You have said it. Now I am no lover of parsons, but I am ready to forgive all the pig-headedness of the race, from Calvin downward, for the sake of that little witch's performance."

"Oh, why call her a witch, sir?"

"My dear, 'tis the finest compliment I can pay her. Who were the witches and wizards of the Dark Ages but the knowing ones, the inventors? The parsons burned 'em all, and if that little Yorkshire girl had written her book four hundred years ago, she would have gone to the stake with the rest. Her own father would have set fire to the fagots. The first woman who invented a gown was sewed up in it and drowned, depend on it, and the first man who baked a loaf of bread shut up in his own oven and baked too. No wonder we are all so stupid, seeing that we are begotten of the ninnies and dunderheads who never invented anything. But the reading—well, let us have a chapter of the *Mysteries of Paris*, unless you know a good ghost story. Think."

Arthura thought. Yes, she knew one or two, she said.

"Close the book, then, my dear, and tell me the first. We must keep the other choice morsels for to-morrow. When you have done the story, you will find my imagination thoroughly

alert; I shall then require only the marvels and horrors that are dear and familiar. These always soothe me to sleep."

Arthura could not resist a smile.

"You are amused at the nature of my soporific, my dear? Well, there is no accounting for tastes. Now for your story. Pile portent upon portent, mystery upon mystery. Be not afraid of making the hair to stand on end. Freeze the blood if you can. So begin."

Arthura told her story—a family ghost story—and Mr. Constantine expressed himself much gratified.

"A very pretty horror, my dear, and it does great credit to your house. A good ghost story is as aristocratic as a long pedigree. Now for the reading. You tell me you are no musician. Are you versed in the music of the nose?"

Arthura looked blank.

"Can you discern between a snort and a snore? We snort wide awake; we only snore when asleep. As soon as you hear the latter sound, turn down the lamp and steal softly away. But you must not mistake the prelude for the performance, the tuning of the instrument for the melody itself."

Arthura took up the book and began to read. And long she read, for Mr. Constantine seemed unusually alert, and even restless.

"The fact is, my dear," he said, "your voice is new to me. 'Twill do its work better to-morrow. And I can't help looking at your wonderful gown, fit for a female Prospero, a beautiful sorceress. Where did you get it, my Prospera?"

"Miss Hermitage gave it to me as a birthday present, sir," Arthura made meek reply.

"I wish I had a diamond star to give you. It wants a diamond star. I had one years ago. That little hussy Polly got it from me." He had lain his head on the pillow, with closed eyes, but now started up uneasily. "Good heavens! what have I been talking about?" he said. "I do lose the thread of my discourse, I know, sometimes. What have I just said, my dear?"

"You said something about Polly, sir," Arthura replied, demurely.

"No indiscretion, I hope? Polly—yes, it was Polly. The saucy minx! But continue, my dear. Don't let us talk. Give me to drink of mandragora."

Arthura went on, and for a long time Mr. Constantine lay in a half drowse, with a smile on his lips, the picture of a

placid contentment. Every word did not reach him, but he caught the meaning brokenly, as the scents of a summer garden reach us through a door that is opened and shut. And at last the voice did its work; Mr Constantine slept indeed, and Arthura left him, herself in need of no mandragora. The next day and the next were spent in the same way—a happy afternoon with Steppie and the children, and a midnight reading and colloquy with Mr. Constantine. Arthura soon found out that he liked to lead up to the reading by a little talk; and strange yet fascinating were Mr. Constantine’s nocturnal discourses, the books on his shelves hardly more so.

“Observe,” he said, on the third night, “the order and contents of my library—my midnight library. You will soon become acquainted with an odder one, I’ll warrant. ’Tis the completest in the world. There you may find *Scipio’s Dream*. That holds a foremost place. And the visit of Ulysses (they’ve changed his name since I went to school) to the phantoms of those who fought at Troy. And the Magic Doctor of the great Spaniard (his name escapes me). And the ghost-seer of the greater German. How names slip from me! Visionaries, illuminati, dreamers, necromancers—not a poet or prose man who has written of the unseen world but is here. I love them all. We have no better teachers.”

“Do you believe, then, in ghosts, sir?” asked Arthura, innocently.

“You misunderstand me, my dear. The belief in ghosts has nothing to do with it. But think, now, who but those men and women lift the veil from the palpable and the familiar, which for the most part is gross and mean? A touch of the supernatural reminds us that we are part spirit, not all flesh. We should, must be, mysteries to ourselves, or life has no meaning. Well, take up what book you will. Wave your wand, my Prospera, and conduct me into the land of shadows.”

“*Frankenstein* lies on the table, sir.”

“Read that. ’Twas writ by the daughter of one seraphic spirit, the wife of another, herself a rare genius. And the world—that is, the parson’s—would fain have burned ’em all three. But read, my dear, read.”

And once more Mr. Constantine listened for an hour or so, with a placid smile upon his lips, fairly slumbering at last. By the fourth night Arthura had grown accustomed to her task, and found it pleasant enough. She herself loved a ghost story, and delighted Mr. Constantine with one or two, which, being family traditions, he now heard for the first time.

"On my word, you are a promising disciple. The other ladies, one and all, poor creatures, used to quake with fear when they came into my room, so Bumstead told me, and were afraid to creep upstairs alone afterward. *Scipio's Dream* and *The Vision of Mirza* they did not mind, *Frankenstein* drove them mad, and *The Ghost-Seer* lost me many readers. They would rather beg for bread than read such things at midnight, they declared. You are always in the humor. Well, what book lies open before you?"

"'Tis a volume in manuscript, sir, and the first page opens with 'Pompey's Vision.'"

"Ah! my manuscript volume. My posy! my phial of elixir! 'Tis a collection of choice fragments and pieces, my dear, that I have myself culled from authors of all countries, ancient and modern, and translated for the delectation of my old age. We will begin to-day at the beginning, and work our way gradually to the end. Stop, however: I had something to ask you. What might it be? Ah! I remember now." Mr. Constantine now raised his head from the pillow, and sitting up, put the following question: "Would you tell me exactly what you think of Valerian?"

CHAPTER XXV.

"I KNOW really nothing of this young man," added Mr. Constantine. "You have lived under the same roof with him for upward of a year. You should be quick at reading character, unless I misread your own. Appraise him."

"Was ever a man read by a woman, sir?"

"On my word, a spirited reply. But something of Valerian's disposition and nature generally you must have learned. We find out if a human being is good or bad, amiable or sour, just as we can tell the color of his eyes or hair. I am particularly interested in Valerian just now, not on his own account, I confess, but on Stephana's."

Athura, ever bravest of the brave, truest of the true, made quiet answer. She had heard nothing, she said.

"What manner of man is this Valerian?" continued Mr. Constantine. "Has he understanding—a heart?"

"None if he marries Stephana," Athura said.

"And why?"

"Because he does not love her, sir, nor will she ever love him."

"I feel pretty certain of that too. But, my dear, wedlock need not presuppose love. People marry for position, for advancement, for a thousand motives besides love."

"The more's the pity."

"Ah! you are romantic, I see. Well, for Valerian. Is he amiable?"

"Not if he marries Stephana without loving her, sir."

"True. Stephana is adorable. But if she, of her own free-will, marries Valerian in order to advance his fortunes, what then? Is he worthy of the sacrifice?"

"He would prove himself unworthy beforehand by accepting it."

"I protest she has an answer for everything. There was a French king, my dear, who loved wit better than war. He would have divorced his dull Savoyard and made you his queen."

"That would have been a pity, sir."

"Why a pity? Have you no ambition?"

"Once his queen, sir, he would have had no more wit out of me."

Mr. Constantine laughed heartily.

"True again. 'Tis wonderful how use and custom stale us all. The philosopher is ever a bore to the wife of his bosom. But not one good word for Valerian?"

"As many as you please, provided he does not marry Stephana. She is a rare woman!" cried Arthura, passionately.

"And he is not rare by any means. Clever, nevertheless, versatile, accommodating, and, as far as I have been able to judge, kind-hearted and agreeable."

Arthura was dumb.

"Poor Valerian. Then you really have nothing to say on his behalf?"

"Everything if we do not couple his name with Stephana's," Arthura now said, warmly. "She is a noble, almost an unearthly being. There is nothing worldly about her. He has many excellent qualities, but he is ordinary flesh and blood."

"And in Stephana's veins flows the true ichor. Well, what more?"

"To place us beside giants dwarfs us even if we are full-sized," Arthura went on. "Valerian must not, dare not,

marry Stephana. She would but appear more magnanimous, he more ordinary, by comparison. And Stephana could never influence him, never reach him from her high spheres. They would dwell aloof. It would be isolation for both."

"Just my own conclusion. My dear, the fact is (putting the Stephanas aside), there are only two kinds of women in the world, the woman who can flirt and the woman who can not. Ten generations of female legislators may evolve a third species, but 'tis yet in the germ. Now Valerian must marry among his equals, and leave the goddess alone. But away with realities. Into the calm gray world of phantoms where I feel more at home, my Prospera! How opens the page?"

"We have come to 'The Sensitive Plant,' sir."

"Ay, I know every line by heart; but no matter. Stephana reminds me of the lady who tended the flowers, and like her she should vanish mysteriously. Read, good Prospera."

Arthura read in spite of that sinking of the heart she had so valiantly concealed. She was shocked and disconcerted; but she said to herself: For the moment only. Do what they might, Valerian would, must remain true to her. Foolish fears! Unworthy trepidation! A dozen Stephanas could not alter the fact that he loved her, and was her own Valerian—no hero, she admitted, but good enough to love and be loved, heroic enough to be true. Nevertheless, Mr. Constantine's revelation haunted her. Valerian's loyalty was being put to the proof. The sweet security of yesterday was rudely disturbed. Not doubt, not misgiving, only uneasiness, crept in, where all before had been serene confidence and perfect understanding.

What made her position most trying was the fact that she dared not write to her lover. One brief note had come from him, in which he said that he should contrive a visit to London soon for the purpose of seeing her. Barring its brevity, the love-letter was perfect, every word breathing confidence and chivalrous devotion. And she should see him soon. It was therefore childish, nay, unreasonable, to dwell upon the chimeras thus conjured up. Valerian marry Stephana, indeed! Stephana marry Valerian! Who that knew the pair could for a moment contemplate such a possibility? There was no lien between them, and Valerian's best and most genial qualities but seemed to separate him from her. He loved the world, and never showed to more advantage than

when displaying his urbane character. Stephana loved all that was not the world, and evidently regarded Valerian's social power as so much energy misapplied. Stephana cared for none of the things in which Valerian excelled, whilst to Valerian Stephana's self was all unapproachableness and mystery. But why this battling with windmills? Valerian loved her. Valerian was true. Nothing more was said on the subject, and the days passed uneventfully. No Valerian, no falling off in lover-like little notes, no tidings of a nature either to allay or disquiet. They were preparing for a grand entertainment on New-Year's Day, Valerian wrote. Would she were there! He was more than busy; he was really harassed by all the details that had to be gone into, and no one to help him. "It was really unkind of my cousin to send you off just when you might have been so useful to me," wrote Valerian, his letters, to a line, a mirror of himself. "But it was a kind of freak I am ever prepared for. Who knows but that I may be cast adrift next? Though—forgive the scolding, dearest—you were not docile, you disobeyed my prayers and injunctions (I saw the dark looks, the impatience, the frowns, as well as Christina). Would it not have been better—a thousand times better—to remain, putting on a little gayety when required? We at least saw each other, spoke to each other—even once perhaps in a week whispered five words to each other. Now many things I fain would whisper I can not write, and 'tis all (can you deny it?) your fault. Well, I love you as dearly as ever any man loved a woman; so forgive me. If I did not love you, should I dare to let you see the real state of the case, which is that your own Valerian is sadly out of patience, spirits, and temper at this especial moment? I'll be an angel when I write to-morrow."

That letter put Arthura in spirits, and she went through her duties with sparkling grace and gayety. Why use the word duty? Every moment of her life under Mr. Constantine's roof was pure unalloyed pleasure, the daily visits home made so buoyantly through snow and fog, the nocturnal confabulations with her sweet old patron. For the sweetness of age is better than the sweetness of youth, and Mr. Constantine possessed it in a rare degree. Youth, indeed, says the German proverb, has no virtue, but the rare nature, like choice wine, mellows in the keeping.

"What is the day, my dear?" he asked of Arthura as the dark December drew to a close.

"Two more, and we come to the last of the year, sir."

"So soon? Well, I'll bid the young scapegrace welcome, and not shed a tear for the old curmudgeon, though he has not used me badly. And a few days more or less, dark or fair, for me, then welcome the great democrat, the only true exponent of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—Death!"

"I hope you will not die yet, sir," Arthura said, cheerfully.

"I am not in a hurry, my dear, though quite ready to take my rest. I only regret that I leave the world so little better than what I found it."

"But you have done your part in making it better, they say, sir."

Mr. Constantine smiled. "True—true. I have worked manfully for man, woman, and beast. I can say that for myself. I have stood up for the right, and, what is more, for the weak. And mark my words, my dear. Dwell not too much on the exercise of kindness throughout your life, but seek rather to be just. Let austere, implacable, unswerving justice be your guide in small emergencies as well as great, not slipshod, purblind benevolence ever plucking at your sleeve. By justice only shall the world be mended. Well, your wand, my Prospera, your magic robe! I am weary of the world and its mendings. Into the land of shadows, away, away!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

FAR and wide on New-Year's Eve flashed through the dusky heavens Miss Hermitage's festive windows. Her house stood on a hill, dominating three sister hills, valley within valley, town and sea, and a beautiful spectacle it thus made, blazing like a beacon-fire amid countless lesser lights. For no sooner was the brief winter twilight over than the lamp-lighter's enchanting business began. A will-o'-the-wisp here, a twinkling light as of a glow-worm there, now a cluster of little stars like the beads of a broken necklace, and lo! on a sudden, as if by magic, from east to west the earth and broad span of heaven are set with fiery cressets. Not a space the size of the palm above or below without its lamp shining out of the Ethiop blackness of the night. On this marvelous panorama, however—glorious illumination that people would

have flocked from all parts to see had it occurred once in a lifetime—neither hosts nor guests had time to dwell to-night. Miss Hermitage’s opening entertainment was to be splendid. Nothing like it had ever been seen in these parts, people said. All as yet was mystery and alert looking forward, but on one point there could be no doubt—Miss Hermitage’s promises to surpass herself would be made good. Valerian indeed promised these things for her, but was not Valerian Miss Hermitage, and Miss Hermitage Valerian? The truth, of course, soon leaked out. As bevy after bevy of fair guests alighted at the door, a sign, a whisper, a wave of the hand in a certain direction, indicated what was in store for them. The spacious entrance hall had been turned into a buffet and reception-room, but when the company on arriving broke up into little knots for tea and gossip, they caught suggestive glimpses from the wide doors of the salons as they were stealthily opened and shut. Now was seen flitting by an airy figure in white and silver, whose feet hardly touched the ground, unmistakable votary of the dance; now an equally unmistakable queen of melodrama, dressed in the fashion of the day. Sounds, too, reached the ears of the guests impossible to misunderstand—tuning up of musical instruments, according of violin and violin. No need for the master of ceremonies to read aloud the programme. The entertainment was to begin with a fairy masque and end with a play. And soon appeared Colette, bearing an armful of little flying sheets, disclosing what already everyone knew. Yes, a drawing-room ballet—irreproachable, of course, in the matter of accessories—was to lead the way to a charming little melodrama performed by competent actors. “A delightful bill of fare,” was the general exclamation, although in so pleasant a meeting-place, and amid such good company, nothing in the way of professional amusement seemed necessary. It was the old story of Valerian painting the lily and gilding refined gold.

Miss Hermitage was in excellent spirits. It afforded her a world of comfort to find that she could do without Arthura, that, indeed, Valerian made up for everything. In her secret heart she half suspected Arthura of some sentimental feeling for Valerian. What could moodiness mean in a girl but falling in love? So she was well out of harm’s way, and as for Stephana and Valerian, they might do as they pleased by-and-by. “How much happier people are without feelings,” thought Miss Hermitage—“with only capacities for

enjoyment! Now all the feeling in the world could not serve me in such stead as this faculty for enjoying myself—a faculty that does good all round without the cant of philanthropy. I fill my rooms with pleasant folk; I spend money like a queen in entertaining them, and like a queen I am made much of." That she was, indeed. The cynosure of all eyes on this especial night was the little person in lemon-colored brocade, trimmed with rich modern lace. "None of your dingy, inodorous, dilapidated old point for me," was Miss Hermitage's dictum. "New wine in new bottles. To each generation its own finery." The gown she wore was really becoming to a spare little old lady with the compactest figure, still perfectly agile and upright, features hard but neat, hands and feet to match, beautifully arrayed in fine silk mittens and fancy stockings and little sandaled slippers after the fashion of fifty years ago.

With one hand resting on Valerian's arm, she now made the circuit of the hall, greeting her visitors as radiantly as any bride acting the part of hostess for the first time. Satisfied and even delighted with Valerian in his capacity of steward she had ever been, but to-night she glanced at him almost fondly—at any rate, more than approvingly. And none could have failed to notice as the pair thus lingered arm in arm the strong family likeness between them. Not only did the likeness exist in build, feature, and outward appearance generally, but in voice, expression, gesture. Worldling for worldling, idler for idler, optimist for optimist, were here, both animated with a cordial liking for life and humankind, both ready to take and leave things as they found them—a philosophy which certainly answers in so far as one's own internal peace is concerned. Such similarities, bodily and mental, we are accustomed to look for among kinsfolk, and perhaps no one would have noticed it now but for the curious link that bound Miss Hermitage and her protégé together. For if Valerian possessed absolutely nothing of worldly goods, Miss Hermitage was a pauper in those things with which nature had so royally endowed him. Hers was the wealth, but his the capacity for making wealth desirable. They depended on each other, her necessities being greater than his own.

"Where is Stephana?" asked Miss Hermitage, accustomed now to appeal to Valerian with regard to Stephana's movements.

Valerian's face clouded. "Stephana is not always to be

depended on," he answered, briefly. "She made no promise to come, remember."

"Our frivolities shock her, I dare say," Miss Hermitage made good-humored reply. "I want her company nevertheless. She can be mighty agreeable."

The musicians now began to play, the doors of the reception-rooms were opened, and at a signal from Valerian the hundred and odd guests took their places. A few minutes more, and the curtain rose. One drawing-room ballet—mazy dance of sylphs, nymphs, and fairies keeping time to airiest music—is like another, and there was no speciality about this one except its grace and gayety. The very spirit of the dance seemed incarnate in these sportive fays and elfs, human creatures they could hardly be, whilst the measures were so gay-some that they set the heart beating quickly from mere pleasure. Nothing could be prettier, daintier, of its kind, and when the roundelay ended, and the dancers vanished quickly as they had come, there was a ring of applause. What would Valerian think of next?

What indeed?

Whilst Miss Hermitage was receiving the compliments of her guests, and they were speculating among themselves upon the next entertainment, Stephana stole in, unobserved except by Valerian. Beautiful exceedingly looked Stephana as she now made her way by groups of modish beauties, starry night flower amid the garish glomes of day! All her dress was of cold yet subdued silveriness of moonlight, and like a cloud or a mist the silveriness seemed to wrap her round, lending mystery, something unearthly, eerie even, to features and form ever free from human ordinariness. Was she human, indeed? "A spirit and a woman too?" or all spirit of the kith and kin of seraph?—no compeer of those who toil and moil in the work-a-day world?

Valerian, feeling a spell of this kind, almost shrank from her cousinly advances. He wished nothing so much as to please her, but the nearer they approached each other in daily intercourse, the clearer he saw what a gulf divided them.

Hitherto Stephana had made no further allusion whatever to the future as it concerned Valerian and herself, but tonight she seemed to verge on confidences, in need of a confidential listener. In the midst of the general hubbub of voices they were alone, and she said, without leading up to the subject,

"You will smile when I tell you what really brought me here to-night."

"Not a love of pantomime or drawing-room comedy," Valerian answered, lightly.

"I love to see a beautiful dance and a pretty play well enough, but my errand to-night is not diversion."

"Have you been peering into your magic crystal? Come you as a wraith bidding me, or one of my neighbors, be ready to die in three days' time?" Valerian again made sportive answer, although a lurking uneasiness made itself heard in his voice.

"I came because I felt instinctively that I was wanted. You may laugh at my presentiments, as you call them," pursued Stephana. "They mean, after all, at least in this case, no more nor less than the sympathy that binds kinsfolk together. Christina is the nearest relative I have in the world. What wonder that I should be irresistibly drawn toward her in a moment of peril?"

Again Valerian smiled, although not quite naturally.

"I trust that your presence may ward it off, then. Our cousin was never in better health and spirits in her life. Look at her!"

Stephana glanced round, and true enough, gayest of the gay, almost sparkling in her overflow of good humor and geniality, was their hostess of seventy and odd summers. Age has its heyday as well as youth, and very likely Miss Hermitage had never appeared to better advantage than now with this cold brilliance in her eyes and faint flush on her thin cheek. The time of disillusion and checks was past. Flattery meant nothing, but hopes could no longer flatter, and she could at last take life and the world for what they were worth.

"Strange," mused Stephana, aloud, "I notice for the first time that Christina must have been handsome in her youth. For the first time, also, I see a remarkable likeness to yourself."

She turned her penetrating eyes toward Valerian, who shrank from their gaze.

"Have you never noticed it?" she added, looking at him curiously and speculatively.

"I am no physiognomist," Valerian said, carelessly, yet with some slight embarrassment.

Stephana saw it, and immediately changed the subject. A moment more and the curtain rose.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ONE drawing-room play, just like one drawing-room audience, is much like another, and on the present occasion there seemed nothing exceptional in Valerian's choice to the bulk of Miss Hermitage's guests. They were merely called upon to smile, shed tears, and applaud, which is within the limits of ordinary capacity. A prettier piece had never been written, said everybody, and of course scenery and accessories were beyond praise, and actors and actresses alike fascinating. Valerian's stage-management was a guarantee so far. What a pity that every Miss Hermitage had not a Valerian! Then opulence would no longer be allied to dullness and luxury—but another name for ennui.

Thus much for the popular estimation of Valerian's little play, that like an April day opened in clouds and rain, but toward sunset showed a smiling blue sky.

The early scenes were indeed moving in the extreme, but the most obtuse speculator could discern that all things were to turn out happily in the end.

There were four present, however, to whom the play seemed to mean more than graceful melodrama or vaudeville, and from the first a physiognomist might have found their faces an interesting study. It was evident that to Miss Hermitage, Stephana, Colette, and Valerian these pastoral and pathetic situations suggested something subtle and problematic, something as far removed from the distraction and ordinary comprehension of those around them as the inmost thoughts of one human being from another. They gazed, listened, became absorbed, with the air of those who are helping to unriddle the mystery of their own lives, to unravel some intricately woven knot of destiny that has hitherto defied all efforts.

Whilst Miss Hermitage and Stephana were spell-bound by the play, Valerian's interest remained divided. From time to time he glanced at Christina, watching every change in expression and every movement, taking care all the while that his scrutiny was not observed. So intently did he peruse her countenance at intervals that it was plain he sought there a comment on the play with which those of the crowd had nothing to do. She was his audience. For her, if for no other, the piece should mean more than an hour's tears and laughter, a new distraction added to so many.

Simple enough was the little drama which Miss Hermitage watched with apparent composure, yet wholly unusual eagerness, and in which Stephana, quietly also, but painfully intent, seemed to read a sibylline leaf, Valerian looking on, cold, vigilant, perturbed, but master of himself.

The story opened after the fashion of an idyl. An old farmhouse in Kent; apple orchards and flower gardens round about; two pretty maidens, in the guise of our grandmothers, making hay in a pightel, or inclosed meadow. These are Molly, the rich farmer's daughter, and her bosom friend and constant companion, Letty, a poor orphan. Soon the prattlings of the girls are disturbed by a rustic swain, whose head appears above the garden wall; and whilst ostensibly making love to the portionless Letty, we soon discover that in reality he is the accepted lover of the rich man's heiress. For Farmer Maple is wealthy, and his only child is to marry a rich man of his own choosing—so he says—or none at all. The girl, however, has a will of her own, and, aided and abetted by her confidante Letty, contrives to carry on courtship with the lover she has chosen for herself. It is as Letty's suitor young Briarley, himself an orphan and undowered of fortune, comes to the house. So far all is bland, sunny, playful; but when the stern old Maple appears the situation becomes grim and tragic. 'Tis the old, old story over again—a rigid father resolved to bend a daughter's will to his own, the one determined to be obeyed, the other as equally determined on disobedience. Then come girlish confabulations, hurried schemes of deliverance, plan after plan, device after device, the friendless, motherless Molly turning to Letty only in her supreme dilemma. And soon a daring plot is laid and carried out. Letty informs her patron that her own marriage with young Briarley is decided upon, and begs as a special favor that Molly may accompany her home—that is to say, to the home of her nearest relation—in order to act as bride-maid. "You are going to marry Molly to Farmer Grouse," she said, passionately, "and Jem is going to take me to Australia. Who knows if Molly and I shall ever meet again?"

The old man consents, first because he is extremely glad to be rid of Letty, whose influence over his daughter he resents, and most of all because Molly promises that on her return she will do anything he pleases. "Only give me this one holiday, father, this one little spell of liberty and happiness with Letty, and as long as I live I will ask no more of you," she entreats, not in tears and on her knees—she knows her father

too well for that—but with playful caresses and insinuations. So the trio set off, and of course we all know on what errand.

It is Molly, the rich man's daughter, who is married to young Briarley in Letty's place—Molly who is ready to accompany him to Australia, to give up fortune, native country, paternal favor, for love's sake. And most audacious of the audacious, bravest of the brave, Letty returns alone to break the news. "What harm can Farmer Maple do *me*?" she said, scoffingly; "or any woman who is not his wife or his daughter?"

Of course the tempest was awful, but it passed harmless over her head. The old man could only rave and storm, and little cared she, a high-spirited, reckless girl, for Farmer Maple's wrath. What really constituted Molly's sin in her father's eye was not the fact of her marriage being clandestine, but low. There are aristocrats in every society, and Farmer Maple looked down with supreme contempt on the son of a village huckster, a ne'er-do-weel, moreover. Young Briarley, although pleasant and comely (good enough for a girl like Letty, who had also to shift for herself), was not sedate, and as yet had followed no calling. What so clear as a mercenary motive on his part? This runaway match was at least no love affair on one side; but Molly had married for love, and on love should she fare.

Letty, finding that the old man did not turn her out, quietly staid on; she saw no good reason for going, and could thus best serve her friend by-and-by. Meantime, Maple insists on secrecy concerning his daughter's marriage. She is away on visits. The neighbors are to know no more. Meantime, the young couple do not prosper. Briarley, whose chief fault is idleness, looking for a reconciliation with his wife's father, gives up the Australian project, gets employment as a clerk, and poor employment it is, sufficing to keep body and soul together, no more. Molly's nature is not one to soften and to beautify in adversity. We must all pay for the foibles of our progenitors, and the inflexible character of Maple the farmer showed now itself in the daughter.

Love disappointed her—what woman does it not disappoint?—and even the joys of maternity were imbittered. A boy was born to her, who should be heir to the rich man's wealth, and not heir only, but the pride of his old age, as the very apple of his eye. Again and again Letty has acted the part of intercessor in vain, and she determines on a final and desperate effort now.

Not a hint is given beforehand of the child's coming, or of what else had happened, but when he is a few weeks old, Letty, ever fond of plot and shift, lays her trap. Molly has hardened toward her father, and refuses to plead her boy's cause, so the little thing is brought surreptitiously into his grandfather's house, where he is found by him.

The climax is terrible.

The old man turns from the cradled infant as from a serpent. "They think me a child, do they," he cries, in a frenzy of vindictiveness and resentment, "to be befooled into harboring those who suck in disobedience with mother's milk? Not I. Away with it! Boy or girl, 'tis none of mine; 'tis naught to me. I have no children."

From the supplicating, insinuating Letty he turns away too. Vainly she holds up the child, tries to make him look at it, touch it. Then, as a last expedient, she breaks forth indignantly:

"Heaven has not doomed you to be childless. In calling yourself so you do but blaspheme," she cried. "Look at this boy, an exact copy of yourself; and his mother is living, God be praised! is close by; is here awaiting your embrace."

Molly enters, not the soft, coquettish maiden we first saw making hay in the pightel, but a pale, care-worn matron, all her father's hardness now written on her face. For the last few weeks have brought her complete disillusion. This marriage for which she had sacrificed so much has ended in an unlooked-for catastrophe. It was the fact of young Briarley's mean birth and ordinary character that more than anything else had set old Maple against him. "Base-born is base-born year out, year in," he would say. "You won't gather corn from charlock seed." The prognostications had come true. Molly is now an abandoned wife, with nothing but her child in the world.

"Father," she cried, sternly and wildly, "you can not, you dare not, disown me now. I am no longer any man's wife, but once more your daughter."

"If so," answered the old man, with a white face—"if, as you say, you are my own daughter, send away the child. Let none know that he is yours, that your name is his father's. Then you shall be my daughter indeed."

There is a pause of silent conflict. How will it end? Shall the fearful bond be entered into—a child so sacrificed to the world, a mother's duty and affection stifled and trampled underfoot? Will love triumph and holiest instinct,

or self-indulgence and clinging to gross needs? No middle course is possible. No angel will interfere. The mother must either be disowned or disown!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE curtain fell amid tremendous applause, and a second and a third time the artists were obliged to show themselves to the delighted audience, whilst Valerian was surrounded by his friends. A thousand questions assailed him at once. Who had written the play? Who had acted Molly so charmingly? And the rustic dresses and scenery? And the music of the intermezzo? Nothing could be daintier, more appropriate? Valerian, hemmed in on all sides by these immoderate inquirers, struggled vainly to disentangle himself. He was compelled, whether he would or no, to smile thanks, make answer, explain, finally to indicate the direction in which supper was to be found. Stephana also, whose appearance had passed without notice in the early part of the evening, was now taken possession of by eager acquaintances. Like Valerian, she felt bewildered and unequal to the drawing-room etiquette just then; but there was no help for it. She must behave as if nothing unusual had happened. In an assemblage of a hundred and odd guests a host or hostess can not be visible to all at once, and what with the pleasurable sense of relief from undue mental strain and the lively gratification of a goodly regale, Miss Hermitage's visitors forgot to notice her absence. The banqueting chamber, indeed, was so royally adorned with flowers and tropic plants that it was impossible to see even your opposite neighbor. All the company, of course, took it for granted that Miss Hermitage was present, by which especial azalea concealed none cared to ascertain. The ripe, sunny wines, the delicate cates, put everything else out of people's minds.

Where all this time was the faithful Colette? She had listened to the play with vague uneasy gestures and fluttering movements, like a little frightened bird. Now she fanned herself, and now she plied her vinaigrette, not able for a moment to retain the same position or master her concern. No one noticed her. Miss Hermitage's guests were not in the habit of paying much attention to her quaint little musician in ordinary, and the play was found absorbing. When at last

an unusually exciting moment came, and everybody's attention was riveted on the actors, Colette stole away and hastened to her room, there to throw herself on her bed in an agony of dismay.

Where was Miss Hermitage?

Stephana had come, disturbed in mind by vague foreshadowings of evil, but the revelation that the play was to her, and the painful, nay, agonized convictions it brought, for the moment put away other thoughts. She felt dazed and staggered, blinded by the light that had flashed on a dark place. On recovering herself in some degree, her first thought was of Christina. That look of hers she had last seen was fresh in her mind, and she could but connect it with some fearful passion. Love was it, or love like hate? Sorrow, anger, or the bitter vindictiveness engendered of both? Stephana now realized, as if by inspiration, what the inner warning of a few hours ago must mean. She had come to save Christina from danger, and now she realized its nature. A chasm yawned at Christina's feet, and it was of her own work, the evil following her as a shadow was a shadow indeed, a real though intangible part of herself. The enemy, the destroyer, was here.

Impelled by these thoughts, one succeeding the other rapidly, Stephana now contrived to steal unobserved from the crowded banqueting hall. Unobserved also she reached Miss Hermitage's bed-chamber, dressing-room, and boudoir, three rooms communicating by folding-doors, with the first story. The outer door stood open, and fire was burning brightly on the hearth, but there was no other light.

"Christina—cousin—are you there?"

Stephana paused for a moment on the threshold; then getting no answer, she moved forward and glanced round. The doors opening from one room to the other stood wide, and all three were silent and deserted, but in the bright fire-light her eyes were immediately attracted to a conspicuous object in the dressing closet.

This was the gorgeous lemon-colored gown of richest brocade that Miss Hermitage had worn throughout the evening. It had been evidently discarded in haste, and scattered upon it, carelessly as if they were ordinary dressing pins, lay the rich woman's famous diamonds. On the cold sheen of the silk they glittered and sparkled dazzlingly, some adhering to it, others lying on the floor, the whole strangely contrasted with the dark purple shadows of the room; for Miss Hermitage loved warmth and sumptuousness, and this especial apartment

was luxuriously curtained and carpeted by warm soft textures of crimson and violet. Only the fire glowed and the pale yellowish-green silk with its sprinkling of diamonds flashed through the prevailing gloom. "Christina," once more Stephana called, softly. Again all was silent, and Stephana now closed the door of the outer room and continued her search. But Miss Hermitage was not to be found.

Stephana very quietly continued her search, now going a story higher. As she climbed the second staircase the confusion of voices below, strains of music, and all the various noises that are inseparable from a festive gathering grew fainter and fainter, till by the time she reached the second landing she seemed to be in a quiet place. Here all was equally deserted. A jet of gas burned dimly at each end of the corridor, but no one was moving about, and from the obscurity and stillness one might have supposed Miss Hermitage's numerous household to be already fast asleep. The servants slept here on the upper story, and at that moment they were one and all regaling below. Not a sound, not a sign of life greeted Stephana as, gray and spirit-like, she moved noiselessly from one place to another. There was yet a third staircase, dark, steep, and narrow, that led to the loftiest part of the house, a small square tower, built by its original owner for astronomical purposes.

Stephana suddenly recollected the existence of this little winding stair as she was about to descend, and she now turned back in search of it. She knew that a door shut it off from the landing, but the exact position of the door she forgot. One after another she opened, now a house-maid's closet, now a linen cupboard, now a box-room; the right one, as usual, came last. When indeed she found the staircase, what was her horror and dismay to find herself forced back by a volume of smoke! The truth flashed upon her in a moment. The watch-tower had been fired. Stephana, to whose mind this dreadful conviction brought another more shocking still, now determined at any cost to reach the little chamber of the tower. How she contrived to effect her purpose she never knew, but will had its way. On the threshold she stood for a moment, blinded by the conflagration raging within. The pavilion was a light, airy construction, with windows looking to the four quarters of heaven, and was now fairly ablaze, whilst in the midst, wearing a loose white gown, her eyes wild and defiant, her lips moving incoherently, moved Christina. It was a Eumenid incarnate.

"Christina!" said Stephana—"Christina!"

The quiet mastery of Stephana's wonderful voice made itself felt, yet not all at once. Miss Hermitage, still holding a candle in her hand—the fatal torch that had worked such mischief—tried to resist the spell, to do her own evil will. Quick as a wild animal seeking escape from the trapper, she now sprang to the balcony, and had not Stephana divined her intention, would in another second have been past all help.

The observatory had never been used except by its original owner, and only an unsubstantial and tray-like parapet protected the outer space or balcony, removed sixty feet at least from the ground, with nothing in the shape of intervening buttress or roof to break the distance. On this terrible pinnacle, then, for a short but awful space hung Christina and Stephana, evil spirit wrestling with the good.

Fury and angel brought face to face in supreme encounter. Hate and love at odds. Had there been lookers-on, they must have discerned something symbolical in the very appearance of this suspended pair, for indeed they seemed to hang like a couple of birds in mid-air; above them the dark iron-black wintry heavens studded with bright gold stars; below, almost iron-black also, the quiet hills, the sleeping town and sea, all, like the skies, showing a thousand fiery cressets behind them, a fiery envelope, the steadily gaining flames of the pavilion.

Stephana had never looked more radiant and spirit-like than now. The silveriness of her dress, the beautiful paleness of her complexion, the dark luster of her eyes and hair, so contrasted with the pearliness of the skin, the indescribable serenity and sweetness combined with something severe in every look and movement—all these made up an apparition at once startling and seraphic.

And what a contrast to the other! For if the superhuman magnanimity and inspired daring of Stephana had never shone forth more visibly than now, in a supreme moment of bodily danger, so Christina's real nature proclaimed itself in the strong light of desperation and cowardly fear. Her thoughts centered in herself only. Nothing mattered, nothing was present to her, but a danger from which death and death alone offered an escape. Whilst Stephana's mind was wholly bent on rescuing another from a self-immolation purely egotistical, Christina realized only the misery and humiliation in store for herself if she lived. There was but one to-morrow—her own; and provided that could be eluded, the rest was not worth a thought. Stephana was tall and slender, and her

bodily strength perhaps hardly exceeded that of her adversary, Christina, in spite of her three-score-and-ten years, being wiry and agile in the extreme. But whilst the swiftness and elusive subtlety of the elder woman's movements were actuated by the frenzy of despair, Stephana was guided—nay, impelled—by a force stronger than any mad impulse. She felt, she new, that she should conquer here, not by virtue of physical or even moral strength, but because she had come for nothing else. The day that presaged evil for Christina had brought also a mandate of deliverance to herself. Christina would be saved, and by Stephana only: how she could not tell.

“Loose your hold!” cried Miss Hermitage, wildly, bent on the only kind of deliverance that seemed possible to her—a plunge into darkness, oblivion, annihilation. The rest mattered little.

Stephana held her fast, though for a moment they swayed backward and forward in deadly peril, as if the next they must both vanish into the night below. No help was near. All on this side of the house was silent and deserted, and the flames within were gathering, yet Stephana's courage did not go.

“Loose your hold, I say!” reiterated Christina, “or I take you with me, and you are not ready! You are not ready!” she repeated, with a mocking laugh.

Stephana felt herself suddenly endowed with superhuman strength. Her hold became as the grip of an armed man, as an iron chain binding the other hand and foot. Her voice, too, was no longer her own. In its inflexible accents Miss Hermitage heard the utterance of doom, of the avenging angel.

“Nor are you ready,” said Stephana, with sad austereness. “You must live, whether you will or no. I have come to tell you so.”

Christina's muscles relaxed. She gradually let herself sink into Stephana's arms, trembling and making low moans. Her fearful purpose frustrated, she seemed the prey of a dread and ghostly terror; but of what, of whom?

“Save me!” she cried, for a moment shaken with passion. “Save me, Stephana! you and none other can! Save me from—from”—then getting out the hateful words with all possible speed, she whispered in her ear—“from Valerian—my son!”

CHAPTER XXIX.

FAR and wide blazed Miss Hermitage's festive lights, and farther and wider now blazed the conflagration, at first supposed to be part of the convivial lighting up. Beautiful and cheerful looked the airy pavilion of the watch-tower thus illuminated, conspicuous among the thousand beacons and twinkling lamps studding earth and sea as stars sprinkled the dusk heavens. Like a meteor it flashed and flickered in the sight of gazers far away, dwarfing and dulling the brilliantly lighted town below, soon making one bright point. one superb illumination, in what seemed now a pitchy environment.

Just as a splendid deed or a monstrous crime obscures lesser acts, whether good or evil, so the fire for the time and figuratively put out all lesser lights.

All was dark that winter night save the mansion blazing on the hill. For on a sudden the truth burst on the coast-guardsmen patrolling the coast and the midnight stragglers in the streets. The house of Miss Hermitage the millionaire was on fire. Then, of course, ensued the very commotion and disorder on which Miss Hermitage had counted. Amid this desperate hurrying to and fro of her household, this stampede of assembled guests as indecorous and summary as that of a routed army, this imminent peril of life and limb to every one, the author of the catastrophe was ignored. On the gay world devolved one duty only—that of self-preservation. On Valerian, as house steward, devolved a thousand. He was bound to concentrate all his energies on putting out the fire: it would be time enough to inquire into its origin to-morrow.

If it is wonderful how much we contrive to know of each other's affairs, still more astonishing is it to reflect on the number of events we are enabled to conceal from our neighbor. The extraordinary and often unexampled incidents, the scandals and mysteries, the shifts and extremities, that make up so large a portion of domestic life are for the most part kept to ourselves. For so doing we act wisely. Existence would indeed be insupportable were it not for a certain reticence and decorum concerning the meaner tragedy and comedy acted on the human stage; fireside rehearsals of more dignified dramas we laugh and weep at when becomingly represented. We are all indeed bound to remember that the duty of renuncia-

tion is more especially incumbent on us in the matter of sympathy. We must husband the sympathies of the wise and the magnanimous, and not squander them upon pitiful objects. Thus it came about that little of what had transpired was known to the agreeable and ingratiating sea-side world in which Miss Hermitage had so long moved a central figure. The house had been fired in several places, and the fire had with some difficulty been put out, the hostess and her strange and beautiful guest Stephana, who were the first to give the alarm, receiving some slight hurt. Miss Hermitage was said to be mentally, not bodily, ill from the shock. Little wonder, poor lady, every one ejaculated, and every one left cards and notes of inquiry to be duly forwarded. There the matter ended, except for a few speculations on the probable origin of the fire.

"Miss Hermitage's jewels at the bottom of it, of course," said one. "A concerted thing. A diamond robbery."

"That comes of having servants who are Swedenborgians and read Radical newspapers," observed another.

A third imputed the fire to a foreign butler whose nose was slightly awry, a fourth to a house-maid who squinted. Had an ill-looking peddler been seen on the premises a few hours before the catastrophe he would most certainly have been tried for arson, and probably condemned, so close is the connection in most minds between darns and damnation, virtuous conduct and irreproachable shirt fronts. No one suspected the truth, except, of course, those who knew Miss Hermitage well—Colette and Valerian—but not a word was said. Only Stephana as yet took Valerian into her confidence.

Next morning, the first day of the new year, she found him in the little breakfast-room, looking haggard enough after that long night of shock, alarm, and exertion. For the first time, too, Stephana noticed that he looked spiritless and depressed, whilst her own weariness was of the body only. One slender hand that had been injured in the fire was bandaged and bound in a sling, but her brow was serene, her dark eyes lustrous as ever, and she greeted Valerian with a sweet smile.

She sat down at the breakfast table and sipped the coffee he poured out for her, glancing at him without a word. At last, as he seemed disinclined to begin, she said, with a searching yet not unsympathetic look: "I have one command to lay upon you. Christina is going away this very day. You must not try to see her."

"Why should I try to see her?" was the bitter reply.

"You must try to forgive each other," Stephana said, sadly and insinuatingly.

Valerian's eyes for a moment showed angry fire. The next he controlled himself, and answered in cold, measured tones :

"I am sorry that you blame me, my cousin."

"What right have I to blame you, or any one?" Stephana exclaimed. Never in all her life had she felt so sorry for Valerian as now. "Can one human being judge another? But it seemed to me"—and here she looked him in the face, all the light of that transparent soul beaming out of her eyes—"it seemed to me that you might have learned the truth without having recourse to a shift."

"From her?—never. You do not know—" He broke off with a deep flush. How could he pronounce the words "my mother"?

"Will you be quite candid with me, Valerian?" continued Stephana, in soft, sweet, sisterly accents. "I know how deeply you must have felt the uncertainty about your birth, and how vindictively you must, in your own mind, have accused the authors of it for the injustice done to you. Here indignation was proper and justifiable. But there is another feeling, as natural and strong, that should surely be yours also. Do you not own to it? Are you not drawn toward your mother?"

Valerian's face but hardened under the influence of these moving words. Stephana, contemplating him, asked herself by what spell she could melt that obdurate heart, subdue that intractable mood. He was hers; she was bound to do with him as she would. Yet he sat there, opposite to her, listening to her, icy cold, frozen into stony indifference. Gazing at him then, she saw as she had never seen it before the likeness between the pair. It was not only Christina's son, but Christina's very image, a second self, she now saw before her.

She moved a step nearer, and said, in the softest, most healing tones of her tender voice: "Dear Valerian, you are not alone; you have a friend to confide in. Unburden yourself to me."

"And if I were to do so," cried Valerian, desperate and vindictive, "I should have a friend no longer. You would turn from me in mistrust and disappointment."

Then with all those dear yet stinging reflections of Arthura rushing into his mind, with all that consciousness of treach-

ery toward her and Stephana vividly before him, what wonder that he sought to justify himself by exaggerating a long-treasured-up sense of wrong? He knew well enough that he was what he was by virtue of character and temperament, and that however much the circumstances of his birth might have marred his prospects in life, they had not taught him to confound good and evil. He was first himself—a reasoning, thinking being, a man after that Valerian the nameless, the disowned. But having now to plead his own cause to Stephana, he seized upon a supreme misfortune, or at least mishap, and made it to do duty for weakness unrestrained, self-indulgence unchecked, principle set at defiance, and duty disallowed.

"How can I unburden myself?" he continued. "You exact high motives and a spirit of self-abnegation in the least little thing. I have none of these to give you. I am a very poor creature, Stephana; perhaps no worse, certainly no better, than circumstances have made me."

"You can not think so meanly of yourself as you say," Stephana replied, kindly though reprovngly. "At least this revelation was no affair of chance; you hazarded the play, and from what motive? Not a sense of injury alone; surely more than that," she pleaded, almost passionately. "Instinct, affection, must have prompted you—"

"Say rather hate," cried Valerian. "Think for a moment, and blame me if you can, if you dare. What have I been to this woman—my mother, then, since you bid me so call her? A friend, an equal, a confidant? Nothing of the kind. She has used me for her own selfish purpose only, wanting no son, only a better sort of serving-man, a superior lackey, ever at her beck and call. As far as serviceableness goes we are quits; I at least have earned my wages."

"But," said Stephana, still using gentleness and suavity, "as yet you do not know all. Do not consider your own wrongs irreparable till you know what her own have been."

"I know already enough," retorted Valerian, in biting tones. "No, Stephana, rid me of my hate toward her if you can and will, but ask no affection in return. Let me never so much as see her."

"Valerian," Stephana cried, turning full upon him the subdued light of her mesmeric eyes, "is there room in your heart for hate? If so, love will be surely pushed out. Master yourself, your worse self, and pity, even love, when duty bids."

Valerian heard in sullen silence. Stephana, having deepest pity for him, discerning the intense wretchedness at the bottom of his mood, grew kinder and kinder, more and more compassionate. The unutterable depth of her pitiful love—not for this poor, ill-used, worldly Valerian any more than for all wretched, sinful souls—shone out of her dark eyes, and thrilled her tender voice as she continued speaking, determined to vanquish at last.

"Do not think that I am insensible to your wrongs. I have perhaps exaggerated them in my own mind." Here for a moment the tears rose and a fine blush mantled her pale cheeks. "For wrongs may appear virtues in those we care most about, and I must have fallen into the error I imputed to you—a nobleness that you disclaim. I took yours to be a generous nature."

Valerian listened, unresponsive, wrestling all the time with himself. He was torn to pieces by the angel and the demon that are in us all, wanting to take this opportunity of revealing everything to Stephana, throwing himself upon her magnanimity for once and for all, wishing at the same time to draw her nearer to him, to make her his close friend forever by winning her confidence and her love. Never was a better chance of righting himself in Stephana's eyes. She would have forgiven everything in consideration of a disinterested love.

"Whose son am I? From whom should I inherit generosity?" he exclaimed, once more shifting all the blame of his own conduct on others. "First make me generous, Stephana; then exact generous deeds. I am no meaner than others so schooled."

She saw that he was struggling with himself, and naturally imputed the conflict to the only problem before her own mind. Here again Valerian's double dilemma served him in good stead. It was Christina's son, not Arthura's lover, battling with his better nature; and to Christina's son how much should be forgiven! She looked at him searchingly, almost tenderly; then she asked him, with that exquisite tenderness that ever marked her speech, "Tell me, Valerian, do you care for me as you did in Italy?"

This question, made in the quietest tones of a woman's sweet voice, and from no mere coquettish curiosity, but the noblest, most single-minded motives, probed Valerian's nature to the very depths. He realized the final test, the palmary proof, herein exacted of him. On this yea and nay must

depend his soul's last lapse or bright redemption—a step upward in the paths of shining goodness and glorious truth, or deep down into the dark, mazy ways of crookedness and wile.

For a moment the conflict lasted, yet how much longer it seemed! Before Valerian's mind flashed a warm, sunny picture—the green heart of a woodland glade; round about, close-set spinnies of larch and fir; above, the blue skies of happy France; and happiest of all, two lovers keeping holiday. He heard the murmurous flow of silvery currents, and mingled with the sound a clear girlish voice prattling of the future that belonged to both. Then Valerian's faculties suddenly quickened to a sense of reality; the past became faint, the dalliance and the dreams, and he bowed in body as in spirit before this august presence. Stephana had subdued, vanquished him, he said to himself, as he now bent down, half kneeling, to kiss her hand, she smiling, without love, but full of pity and encouragement. And somehow the uncommon graciousness of her looks and manner, and the positive glory that seemed to sit on her pure forehead and beam out of her rare eyes, made Valerian for a moment feel as if she must have cast a glamour over him, and made him hers in spite of duty and himself. “Do I care for you?” he cried, yielding himself to the alluring thought, the supreme condonation. He was no free agent. Stephana willed to fascinate him. “I am yours, whether I will or no—yours, Stephana, to do with as you may.”

She made no answer, but, bending down proudly and compassionately—for she saw that there were tears in his eyes—kissed him on the forehead. A kiss that meant many things. Not love, certes, but a prophecy of spiritual amendment on his part, whose base is love, indeed; reconciliation also, which is of love's fellowship; and above all these, love's essence and sublimate, divine pity.

CHAPTER XXX.

STEPHANA might lull herself into fancied security with regard to Valerian, hoping if not believing here to have found or evoked a soul. But how to melt that kindred nature, hitherto unyielding as iron in her hands? Would Christina ever prove tractable? Would she own at last to some soft

influence or tender affection? To Stephana just now came one of those phases through which all fine spirits sooner or later must pass. She could not help asking herself any more than other noble creatures why the sensitive must be paired with the dull of feeling, the clear-souled with the earth-born, the chaste with the gross-minded. Why should they whose thoughts perpetually soar beyond the vulgar needs of day be dragged to earth by meaner kinship? Where could she find two beings less in sympathy with her than these two, Valerian and Christina? Yet she must bear them company, share their daily life, love them if she could. Perhaps the response to such questioning is not hard to find. There is no island of the blessed except in the day-spring of human history. The supreme lesson of knowledge is that good and evil do not dwell apart, and that to combat the evil, the good must seek it out and bear it company. We can not cut off the wicked, but we may lessen the springs of iniquity, and so gradually diminish their numbers. When each of us takes the sins of our next-door neighbor to heart as if they were our own, the world will be in a fair way to mend. Not a disturbing word was breathed to Christina till Stephana and Colette had carried her a hundred miles and more from Valerian. "I can not see him. Keep him away from me," was the sick woman's constant cry, for she was sick indeed. No bodily distemper ailed her, no physician had to be called in; her malady was a morbid fear of Valerian, and the medicine lay in security from him.

When at last they reached Torquay, leaving Valerian behind, she put the question nervously: "Valerian will not come? You are sure of it, Stephana?"

Stephana sat down beside her cousin in the cheerful spacious drawing-room looking on to the sea, and smiled reprovingly. "I have already promised. Do you not think I can keep Valerian away?"

"They say you can do anything you choose," was the half-satisfied reply. "There are many things you may now do for me."

"All as easy as the keeping of poor Valerian away?"

"They should be, if half what folks say concerning you is true." Miss Hermitage's eyes looked at Stephana as if fain to read her very soul. "How much is true?" she added. "Do you have visions? Can you foresee what is coming? Have you power to look beyond the grave?"

All these questions, put in Miss Hermitage's brusque, hard

way, took Stephana fairly by surprise. She was silent for a little breathing space, then made quiet reply :

"Visions, foreshadowings, insight into futurity? What are they, indeed, but so many names for spiritual gifts of the less common kind? If I see things that are hidden and mysterious to most, is it not because I have pondered on them more? If I seem at times warned of any rare event about to happen, must not such warning spring from intuition, shared with the rest of my fellows, only possessed by myself in a more marked degree? And if"—here she lifted her radiant forehead and serenely confronted the peering gaze fixed upon her—"if I do feel at times as if the mystery of the tomb were revealed to me, is it not merely saying that I seem to see that which I so intensely hope, that which I so implicitly believe in?"

"Stephana!" cried the elder woman, eagerly, "I believe in you, although in nothing else. Lift the veil. Life I know. Let me understand whatever be the meaning of death!"

Stephana shook her head with a wondrous smile of sadness, scorn, and pity.

"I would willingly accord your request," she said, "but the eyes that penetrate into the mysterious and the unknown must be pure. For what is all mystery but another name for God, and who can approach Him without a guileless heart? Peace should be there—love, too, and compassion."

"People can fulfill their duty without love," retorted Miss Hermitage. "I am ready to do all in my power for Valerian. Let him be. But tell me, Stephana, what is this death we all talk so much of without understanding? Are you aught wiser here than poor little Colette, who believes that the burning of candles will save her mother's soul?"

"You shall judge for yourself when I can tell you exactly what I have been brought to believe," answered Stephana. "For the present, I can not, I dare not, take you into my confidence. Think for a moment. Were I to lead you, as a curious child into a stately palace, and to try to explain the wonderful and beautiful things I have to show to your inner eye (no less clear and bright than those you look on now, the blue sea, and the sky, and the shore), how would you fare when thus brought face to face with Divine truth and love, which are as a near and solemn presence to those who abide in them—how would you fare, I say, with this darkness about your soul, this hatred in your heart, and for whom—your own son, your very own, although born—"

"In shame, but not in sin," murmured the other, in a low voice. Then she added, slowly, "There was a marriage."

Stephana paused, and piercingly, although with angelic mildness, gazed on her energumen. For was not this poor thing a very demoniac, demon-haunted, struggling against the light of shining truth and goodness?

After a brief silence, during which Miss Hermitage moved restlessly in her chair, Stephana asked, in a sad, gentle voice: "If, then, no sin, why any shame? You say there was a marriage?"

Again Miss Hermitage turned away from the beautiful winter sunlight and the sight of the silvery sea, and tossed her head uneasily on the cushions. "Valerian knows. Valerian guesses. It is his affair. I want you to talk to me of other things," she moaned, querulously, half crying.

Stephana looked and listened in a painful state of doubt. She did not feel sure that Christina was telling the truth.

"It is very unkind of you to disoblige me," she said, in the same pettish tones. "I have had a great shock. It will very likely kill me. I do want to know what you think dying is—dying—dying! We talk of it every day, but who knows anything at all?"

"I could give you peace would you but give me something in exchange," Stephana made answer. "You can not have quieting thoughts and lovely dreams and celestial visitations whilst you nurse an uneasy conscience."

"I am afraid of you, Stephana. Yet what harm can you do me? Why do you gaze as if to read me through and through? What do you want?"

"Only the truth," answered Stephana, almost solemnly. "This shrinking from Valerian, this unnatural dislike, this secrecy of so many years, if, indeed, it is as you say—"

"I am a common woman, but I sinned not the common sin," Christina said at last. "Valerian was born in wedlock." She now sat up in her arm-chair, and spoke rapidly and desperately, as if keenly anxious to unburden herself, as before she had been resolute to keep silence. "You can not judge me. Your young life was happier and better than mine. I had never any liberty, any love. I was Eve snatching the forbidden fruit. But Colette knows. Colette shall tell you everything."

"Much is forgiven where love has tempted into wrong-doing," said Stephana—"if you loved indeed."

"What is love?" asked Miss Hermitage, impatiently.

“There is a love born of passion; that is love like hate. You are young; you may still know a better kind. I never shall.”

“The love of men and women for each other should be lasting and sweet, but may turn to the bitterness of gall. There is other love in the world, and good and comforting it is. That should be yours now.”

“You have Valerian in your mind: I forget that you two are going to marry. That is why you want me to be kind to him, I suppose.”

“Just to him rather; justice is the best kindness, the only kindness I am thinking of.”

“Valerian will never forgive me, whatever I do for him now—never, never.”

“He will, he must forgive,” Stephana replied. “But tell me one thing—why this concealment of so many years if Valerian is entitled to his father’s name?”

“The name would have shamed me and him. ’Twas a low marriage. That is why. Is not pride the devil’s offspring? Such pride was my father’s and mine.”

“Yours was not all the blame, then! You were constrained to this deceit?” Stephana asked, with pitying concern.

Miss Hermitage answered, averting her face: “All women are not idolaters of their children. I suppose, if I had cared much about Valerian, I should never have consented to the past.”

Stephana listened in silence, saddening as she heard.

Christina went on, apologetically: “Kinsfolk do not love each other just because they are kinsfolk. There must be something else to draw people together. And what could I do? My father would have the whole or nothing. How could I have supported the child had he cast us off? And afterward, when I was free, and my own mistress,” she added, insinuatingly, as if here at least one woman must understand another, “there were two reasons for secrecy—pride first, fear afterward. I had already served one master—my father. I should have had another in Valerian’s father. He died before the boy was born, and I knew that Valerian, when his time came, would try to lord it over his womankind like the rest. Now you have the truth. Are you satisfied? But talk of something else. Put Valerian out of my head for a whole week, and then I will say that you have not been called siren, enchantress, sibyl, and how many more such names for nothing. Never mind what you say. The words you use always

make me feel dreamy," Miss Hermitage added with a grim smile. "'Tis like listening to a sermon."

Stephana humored her, and began to talk in a low caressing voice that of itself seemed an incantation. Soft witchery was in her eyes, now no more retributive, but full of encouragement and gentle suasions to pure tranquillizing thoughts. A deeper spell, however, than musical voice and sweet looks lay in Stephana's words, and by little and little they soothed Christina's spirit, and led it into far-off, visionary tracks. "You say," she began, "that you are eager for insight into the unseen world and the after-life. But the acme of knowledge is only reached by slow and toilsome efforts, and if this is true of material things, how much more true must it be of celestial ones? The beginnings of knowledge must be sought for in the actual visible world, which we can in a measure grasp, and which we abide in. The sunset, the wave, the flower! Learn to understand these as far as it is given to mortal minds to understand anything. Then, filled with awe, pity, and love, with far-reaching curiosity and reverential thankfulness let us turn our thoughts to the beauty and wonder and completeness that lie beyond, and of which these earthly images are but a feeble reflex. Who is humble enough to understand Divine love, of which life is but one manifestation? And so it is only by humility that we must set out on the quest, and contemplate the worm crawling at our feet, and the globes innumerable shining in space above our heads. Look at this sea-shell, lined to our eyes with the most brilliant colors—violet, azure, green as a dove's neck, amber and pale gold, all mingling and making a wondrous show. Yet these dazzling hues are no blues, yellows, purples at all, and only appear so by virtue of a peculiar crystalline formation. We are therefore in presence of one kind of beauty which is apparent, but dependent on another kind hid from us. Is it not thus with the life seen and unseen? We seem to be what we are, and we take the visible world for what it appears to be. Has not every human life a double mystery, a twofold existence, the one bright, it may be, but ephemeral, the other belonging to the Truth and the Being that are eternal? Break this mother-of-pearl lining. The rainbow hues vanish, the laws of symmetry remain; and so with the individual dissolution of the body called death, which is independent of the Infinite Life, of which each of us is but an emanation."

Stephana continued, Christina listening as some artless savage to subtle music he does not understand.

Soon the low exquisitely modulated voice and the bright thoughts and fancies so aptly expressed lulled the sick woman into drowsiness and dreams. Soothing was all the medicine she needed, and what soothes like a tender voice that speaks of far-off beautiful things?

CHAPTER XXXI.

"OUR ghost story anon," said Mr. Constantine, when Arthura entered his room; precisely at twelve of the clock, on the third day of the new year. "I have something to tell you, my Prospera. The world is turned topsy-turvy. We are all walking on our heads. You and I are a-dreaming like our betters."

Arthura opened her eyes, although not more astonished than usual. Mr. Constantine would be astonishing as long as breath was left in his body.

"What! No impatient why and wherefore? No Lord 'a mercy, and all good angels save us!"

"The world has always seemed to me topsy-turvy, sir, and if people did not walk on their heads would they make so many blunders?" asked Arthura.

"On my word, a pat answer ever on the tip of her tongue! Walking on the head has not muddled your thoughts, anyhow. But the news—the wonderful news! I really have no breath for it all. Well, all kinds of marvels happened on New-Year's Day. The household by the sea is broken up. Valerian and his rich patroness have parted company. He is coming to make his way in London."

Arthura listened now, all expectation. Her fresh girlish trust in Valerian was not clouded. He might be going to marry Stephana in the eyes of the world, but he was her own Valerian for all that. Love makes two people belong to each other forever, thought Arthura, and so think most lovers and maidens at twenty-four.

"I have not told you half the news yet," Mr. Constantine added. "The most important part of it was confided to me in strictest secrecy. Can you keep a secret, my dear?"

"No, indeed, sir; the gist of a secret lies in the telling."

"'Tis a dead secret, then; but, on my life, I can't help telling you. I am tired, however; I will wait till the morrow. By-the-way, where *do* you get your ghost stories?"

"Ghosts run in my family, sir, and my step-mother has taught me several. She has an especial affection for this."

"Admirable woman! Would I had such a step-mother! Well, for your story. Be your ghost freakish, pranky, benign, hair-bristling, horrid, he is welcome. Come in, good ghost. I bid you good-morrow, kind ghost. We wait for you."

If Arthura excelled in the art of telling ghost stories, it was as Mr. Constantine's pupil. He had fashioned her to the business, first by showing her how tales of wonder should be read, and next by showing her how they should be narrated. Arthura was guileless of book-learning, but her apt, eager, audacious young mind must have some aliment, and she found it here. The supernatural, the marvellous, the unknown, were to her what ordinary love stories, boarding-school music, and clerical slipper-making are to those young ladies as yet outside the intellectual regions of wranglerships or the classical tripos. So she had thrown heart and soul into her new vocation, amazed herself no less than her instructor by the new powers thus developed.

"A most ingratiating ghost! a most sociable, unceremonious ghost! We'll ask for his company another day. Now take up those wondrous little forest stories from Germany. Read about the ancient bride who on her marriage morn was enticed away by a wizard of beautiful appearance, and when he let her go from his enchanted garden she found every one staring at her with amazement, as well they might. She had been away a hundred years! Open the book where you like. 'Tis all fascination, mystery, and wonder."

Arthura did as she was bidden; but ere she had read a page, the old man said:

"You may leave off, my Prospera. I am not lucid to-night. I feel already in the land of shadows you have so beautifully brought before me. And soon I shall be one of them—but not too soon! Why do we live so long?" he continued, after a pause. "Be warned, my Prospera: die young; die in the full favor of your friends and the world, or inherit five thousand a year. Old age is a luxury for the rich to indulge in only. Remember the worst line ever penned by a great poet,

'Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.'

We must buy 'em all when we begin to tumble to pieces—eyesight, feet to walk on, *esprit*; and if we can't buy a digestion, like the man in the story, meats are to be had requiring

none. But age and penury, decrepitude and forlornness—’tis a picture to melt the gods to compassion.” He raised his head and looked at Arthura with an odd smile. “People for the most part take too much trouble about keeping the breath of life in them. As if life for the mere sake of life were worth a pinch of salt! But the manner of life whilst we are in our prime, how many does that concern? When the tools fall from our hands, let us make way for our betters, I say. You are young, and shall greet many a sunrising, but ’tis time for me to wrap myself in my cloak and turn my face to the wall. God bless me! And now good-night, my dear; I can sleep, I think. Rest you well.”

Arthura stole quietly out of the chamber, although little disposed to close her own eyes. What, indeed, had she to do with sleep after such news? Valerian no longer his kinswoman’s dependent, Valerian manfully making his own way in the world, seemed twice, threefold, her own. She realized in a moment, as she thought, the effect of these welcome disasters not only on her lover’s worldly prospects, but on his love for herself. The necessity for self-reliance and his very isolation must draw them nearer together, reasoned the generous girl, ever judging of the springs of action in others by her own. Could this change mean anything else but the fulfillment of happy common dreams, a sweet home, and toil mutually shared, daily fare made romantic and beautiful because it belonged to two?

When at last she did sleep it was to dream sweetly, and next day when she set off as usual to help Steppie with the housekeeping and the children’s lessons, it was with a beaming face. To her great astonishment, Steppie, who met her at the railway station, wore a beaming face also. She not only smiled, she actually indulged in a near approach to a laugh. “Dear little mamma, has Aunt Fanny sent each of the children a Sunday suit?” asked Arthura.

“Oh, Arthura, why am I so much more wicked than other people? I ought to be weeping and wailing in a darkened room.” Here she did indeed break down and give a genuine sob. “Aunt Fanny will never send the children any more new frocks.” Another sob. “Aunt Fanny’s gone to heaven.” Then the tears ceased to flow, and the pale, pretty, care-worn face brightened again. “Aunt Fanny has left me a thousand pounds.”

“Kind Aunt Fanny! You will be so much happier now,” Arthura said

"No; I shall be more comfortable, but not happier; instead, more miserable. Think how heartless of me to be able to rejoice at such a moment!"

"But you are rejoicing over the thousand pounds, not over your Aunt Fanny's death. I am sure you are as sorry as can be."

"That I am," said poor Steppie, wiping her eyes. "And, oh, Arthura, I shall never forgive myself for not having finished those mitts I was knitting as a Christmas gift. There was a dense fog on the day I wanted to buy more silk, and I dreaded going out in it, and now poor Aunt Fanny"—here she began sobbing again—"will never have her black silk mitts—never! never!"

"You must comfort yourself with the thought that she does not want them," Arthura made reply. She had never seen Aunt Fanny in her life.

"Nor does she want the thousand pounds. That ought to be a comfortable thought too," poor Steppie said. "But how I wish she had left me the legacy and gone on living all the same! There is always something to spoil our enjoyment in the world."

"We must not be on the watch for it, then," Arthura replied, cheerfully. "We should have had eyes in the back of our heads had Providence intended us to see everything at once. You can not bring Aunt Fanny back again, but you can so use her money as to make us all happier by seeing you so."

"Oh, Arthura, I was never more miserable in my life!"

"But people can be happy and miserable at the same moment; and just think what a comfort this money will be! Mr. Constantine shall advise us as to the investment. You will be quite rich."

"Am I the most selfish being in the world?" cried Steppie, indignantly. "Every penny you have spent on me and the poor children shall now be repaid you. Then your poor papa's debts—they are mine as well as yours."

"We will settle everything by-and-by," Arthura said. "You shall do exactly as I like, and I will do exactly as you like. That is the way to settle quarrels."

Then they reached the house. What an abode of content and animation now that Arthura was a daily visitant! No more gloom, monotony, complaints; all vivacity, freshness, grace. Thus will a bright spirit transform a dark place.

"Kisses first and lessons afterward," cried the boy Walter,

throwing his arms round his step-sister's neck, and kissing her again and again.

“Buns first and lessons afterward,” cried Benjamine in her turn, laying a nefarious hand on Arthura's cloak pocket. Gentlest, most docile creature imaginable, she as yet resembled those little animals so low in the stage of development as to consist of a mere sac and an orifice—skin and stomach only.

“Arthura,” said Walter, “when you have taught me all you know, will you let me go to sea?”

“Why can not you be content to stay with mother and Arthura and little sisters?” asked Steppie, reproachfully.

“Because you will love me twice as much when I am a sea captain,” cried the boy. “And I want to come home with a red face and a purseful of money, and see all the people throwing up their windows to look at me as I strut up the street.”

Benjamine laughed immoderately, Steppie called to order, and spelling and sums were begun.

CHAPTER XXXII.

VALERIAN took possession of his new quarters in about as uncomfortable a frame of mind as was possible for any human being to be. Everything had gone wrong, yet he felt obliged to confess that everything had gone according to his wishes. He had played a desperate game, and worsted his adversary. He was not only master of the position, but master of himself, free to go whither he willed, to do as he would with his life. All these facts he repeated to himself again and again, but they failed to bring re-assurance. Whichever way he looked, he saw himself hemmed round by problems and obstructions; no straight open path anywhere. His best friends in the world were these three—Christina, Stephana, Arthura. How was he requiting their friendship? A letter from Stephana lay on the writing-table, and he sat down to answer it as to a heavy task. It was the kind, confidential letter that any woman would write to a dear friend; the style could not be displeasing to him, but the gist of it lay in a question he found impossible to answer.

How had he obtained a knowledge of the facts on which his play was based? asked Stephana. Was it mere supposi-

tion? Had he drawn inferences only and acted on them, or were the data actually in his possession, and if so, how came they there—honestly or by fraud? Stephana's question was not framed thus, but so it shaped itself to Valerian's uneasy mind; and long he sat, pen in hand, unable to indite a syllable. The explanation forced upon him must be easier by letter than by word of mouth, and he knew it was inevitable. Yet he hesitated. When at last he put pen to paper, his mind underwent one of those curious phases not uncommon with those who are ever moved by two impulses. Valerian always intended to follow the straight course, but could not help reasoning himself into the advisability, even necessity, of the crooked. He wanted to have Stephana's confidence and sympathy at any price, and at first he said to himself that this should be paid even at the risk of self-abasement. Stephana should know the truth, and nothing but the truth. Words, however, on paper have a hard look. They put us out of countenance sooner than the same confession made by speech; and so the first page was torn, and the second, and the third, and when the fourth was begun not a trace of the original letter remained. Style and substance were remodelled till both became unrecognizable from the original copy. Valerian, in the first instance, had set out with the intention of adhering to the unvarnished truth, but finally ended in romancing. The first page, however, contained verity.

"You will most likely be astonished to learn," he wrote, "that the earliest notion of my possible relation to Christina arose from a consciousness of antipathy, the kind of antipathy that belongs to nearness of kin—indeed, that arises from nearness of kin. Why should people not nearly related ever dislike each other? There are a dozen reasons why those of the same blood should do so. They see their own frailties and defects, mental as well as physical, reflected, often distorted, as in a mirror. They cannot get rid of a perpetual monitor, or at least reminder, of what they would fain forget. If the shining qualities predominate, a sense of comparison is evoked no less painful than self-criticism. So it was with Christina and myself. The shining qualities were not there, certainly, but others as forcibly challenging comparison. I was serviceable to my protectress—nay, essential to her comfort—and she always showed consideration and open-handed generosity to me, for which I am not ungrateful. There was never any pretence of affection between us.

"The truth, or the probable truth, having once flashed across my mind, a thousand circumstances seemed to confirm it. I knew that one person, and one only, was in Christina's confidence. Colette might—must—know, but Colette would never tell. Her attitude was always that of a mediator between her patroness and myself. She would give affront twenty times a day by interference on my behalf, always of a conciliatory nature, and always in matters of little moment. She had evidently made up her mind that at some future time, and by dint of her own efforts, Christina and I should become attached to each other. I could not help remarking this, and it seemed to me, viewed by the light of a steadily growing conviction, evidence of secret remorse on Colette's part. She herself felt concerned in the wrong that had been done me, and hoped to make amends. But for some such feeling, why her apologetic behavior, her reiterated mediations, her supererogation of friendly offices? It is my firm belief that the kindly little French woman often remonstrated with her mistress in secret, and that I formed the only subject of contention between them. Christina would not love me enough, and Colette could not make her. Another point struck me; Colette never seemed satisfied with our mistress's liberality toward myself. She seemed—so at least I began to fancy—as if I ought to be treated like the master of the house, as if I ought rather to share than serve the rich Miss Hermitage's fortune. In trifling matters Colette would put in a word. Mr. Valerian should have his riding-horse; Mr. Valerian should have his valet. I could not be made too much of, she seemed to think. We were always on the best of terms, Colette and I, and in our free and easy conversations of many years she had dropped statements I now turned to account.

"I gathered that *one* conspicuous incident, and one only, had broken the monotony of Christina's past life. This was a quarrel with her father, and an absence following it of many months from home. Concerning this quarrel Colette was extremely reticent. The pair of friends, the Squire's daughter and her companion, had traveled for more than a year. Where did they go? How did they occupy themselves? Such questions Colette would ever answer vaguely and with evident reluctance. Yet at times she would advert to this epoch as if it had especial charms for her, and as if she were compelled to do so against her will. Was it that she felt the burden of a secret? Was it that she would fain have

spoken out but dared not? One or two hints she did let fall of a love affair, of Christina's determination to marry against the Squire's will, of a final reconciliation. She named no names in conjunction with this love affair, but on former occasions had often mentioned a personage whom I could but associate with it. This was the riding-master of the pair, who, somehow or other, Colette could not seem to get out of her head, although he was never alluded to in her mistress's presence. My suspicions were aroused here, and I felt that I had a clew. Knowing as I did the character of the daughter, and of the father also, I put these things together till a coherent story shaped itself in my mind—a runaway marriage, an after-confession, a final sacrifice of maternal feeling to pride, and for the rest silence. But you will say there was a third voice that must have made itself heard if these suspicions were true. The lover, the husband, the father of the child, where was he? You may be sure I had pondered on this often, and many a time had tried to elicit some inadvertent explanation by throwing Colette off her guard. It was only by chance, however, that I learned more. She had been ailing from what French women call a nervous attack, and I overheard her murmur to herself that 'never since getting the news of Henry's sudden death had she suffered from such palpitations.' By the name of Henry she had always called the riding-master."

So far Valerian's explanations were genuine, but he knew that more would be required to satisfy Stephana. He added, now writing desperately, letting the words do with him as they would :

"I have no proofs to give you. Had proofs been in my possession, should I have acted as I did? There would have been no necessity for shift and stratagem. Do not blame, therefore, but rather pity me for being driven to such extremities ; and what is more—yes, Stephana, I say it for once and for all—you are said to possess subtle fascinations over your fellow-creatures. Use them now. Exorcise two evil spirits : reconcile me to my mother if you can.

"VALERIAN."

But what if Valerian had added a postscript hinting at betrayed confidence and violated trust, private documents surreptitiously handled, and secret places pried into? For Valerian had told a part of the truth only. The basis of his play had been a fragmentary journal in Colette's hand-writ-

ing, and of that diary and the means by which he had obtained access to it he said never a word. The Molly, the Letty, the sire, the swain, of Valerian's idyllic play all lived in these sentimental pages, penned for her own satisfaction, and as a relief to outward secrecy, by a girl, more than thirty years before. The outline of the story, with some reservation, was there. He had but hazarded the sequel, put in a few details, and made of the scattered incidents a consistent whole. On the other hand, might not Valerian have urged on his own behalf that he had combated fraud with fraud, and forced his way as the owner of stolen treasure into the thief's house? His birthright had been filched from him. Was he not justified in using any means to wrench it from the hands of those who held it back? All these arguments, and many more, Valerian might have put before Stephana, passionately, vindictively, maybe unanswerably. Because he dreaded a shadow of discredit he held his peace when it most behooved him to speak. In Stephana's eyes, at least, his conduct should appear flawless.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ink had not dried on the page, and Valerian lingered, seal in hand, when a clear, joyous voice called his name. How may a word find a soul's depth, as a pebble the well's bottom! In a moment he felt conscious of himself—that hidden self, dark and unfathomable to other eyes. It was but his own name he heard, and a maiden uttering it. Yet he stood still, hesitating painfully.

"Valerian! Valerian!" again exclaimed Authura, no cloud on her brow, no uncertainty in her movements. The true, transparent nature shone out of her steadfast eyes and betrayed itself in her welcoming smile. An apparition, an apparition of joy and beauty, she seemed as she stood thus, an impersonation of the daring maidenly love that thinketh no evil.

There was wintriness in the heavens and in the air, but the warm carnation of her lips and cheek, and the touches of bright color relieving her dress, cheered the place if they could not cheer Valerian's heart. Undismayed by his silence—attributing it, indeed, to overjoyed surprise—she now moved to the writing-table by which he was standing. Then,

with indescribable, almost infantine satisfaction, she unclosed her palm and dropped several bank-notes onto his writing-case. Each was crumpled, for, regarding them as far too precious to consign to purse or pocket, she had brought her treasure from one end of London to the other in her hands.

"Count these notes," she said, blushing with pride and pleasure. "There are one, two, three fifty-pound notes. It is my whole worldly fortune, and I make it over to you."

Still crimsoning with delight, she bent over the paper money, fondling each by turn as if in those symbols she was deciphering Valerian's future weal and her own. The mere suspicion that her lover was not at one with her, and that boundless confidence no longer existed between them, as in the matchless French days, never entered into her mind. It must be with Valerian as with herself. Once more together, the ills of separation were surely as if they had never been. Her heart must open to his, and his thoughts commune freely with her own. Love made them artless and trusting as children who have singled each other out for comradeship.

She babbled on blithely: "I had hoarded up this money for the remainder of papa's debts, but my step-mother has had a little fortune left her, and insists on paying the debts herself. So I have a hundred and fifty pounds for my poor Valerian. Mr. Constantine tells me you have come to London to make your way; you will need money. You will not refuse my little all? But what is the matter?"

She uttered the last words suddenly seized with consternation. She was now looking him full in the face, all the glow and gaysomeness faded from her own, all her painful entreaty told without a word. He stooped down and kissed her pure forehead. What a kiss! Arthura felt chilled by it to the very veins. No words could have so utterly disconcerted her. Reading that expression of dismay once more, once more he bent down and touched her candid brow with his lips, Arthura waiting pale and expectant as one to whom the next moment may bring sentence.

"You should not have brought me your money," he said at last, looking as spiritless and unhappy as herself. He added, slowly, "And you should not have come."

It was the first time Arthura had ever been directly reproached by Valerian, and the truth began to dawn upon her painfully. Her best friend was angry, nay, affronted with her. Tears of vexation rose to her eyes, and her cheeks crimsoned again, this time from shame and indignation. She

might have done wrong, but Valerian of all others had the least right to blame.

"We are not in France, remember, dearest," he went on. "There are things a young lady may do, and things she may not do. You have acted generously, but without taking thought."

"I only wanted to be kind," murmured Arthura.

"Kind! kind!" cried Valerian, running his fingers desperately through his hair. "First be kind to yourself. We are not in Madame Henri's drawing-room at Nantes. What would my friends think if they chanced to call and found you here?"

It was a brusque, even brutal speech, yet Arthura could but acknowledge the truth of it. She realized the unwelcome conviction at once. Her conduct was not only inconsequent, but wanting in maidenly reserve. Where, however, was the love that should have risen up as an advocate? where the tenderness that should have pardoned all for the sake of the motive? She rose proudly to go, no playful vindication on her lips now, no arch remonstrance in her eyes.

"Pardon me, a thousand pardons, my darling," Valerian said, hurriedly and apologetically, evidently anxious to get the interview over. "I will come and see you in your home. I will tell you everything. Forgive me if I express myself plainly. I thank you heartily for your generous intentions. But you should not have come. It was wrong of me to let you go on that holiday trip to France. We must become circumspect in the future. We must have some regard to the world."

The world! Arthura stood still with sealed lips and a pale, anguish-stricken face. For a stronger, more cruel light played on the reality now, and brought it home to her. Not for the first time to-day had she fallen below Valerian's standard. He had, then, been dissatisfied with her a year ago without ever saying a word! She thought she could understand that part of his conduct hitherto mysterious, the long interval between letter and letter, the silence as to his changed fortunes, the chilling reception of to-day, the spoken, and what was hardest of all to bear, the implied reproach.

That little word with which Valerian's sentence finished seemed to rise up as a wall between them. The world! What but the world had divided them from the beginning? What but the world prompted Valerian's unkindness now? Might not the world end by separating them more and more,

and wearing away their love for each other? Her quick, impatient mind went farther. She thought she could date every change in Valerian's behavior from that French holiday, and recollected happiness rose up as a Nemesis to smite her now.

She was but justly punished for having loved too well. She looked at him, no longer, as she deemed, her adoring lover and closest friend in the wide world; rather her judge and discommender. At last she said, very quietly and pathetically, her mind full of the lost trustfulness and joy and hope, and of the present blank and uncertainty: "I know that I ought not to have gone on that holiday excursion with you. But, never let any one blame me except yourself. I could not bear it."

She went on, struggling now not with tears, but an agitation deeper still:

"If my step-mother and the children should ever hear of it, I mean. You made me promise to say nothing of our engagement to them. And now, if they should hear what I have done, and that you blame me for it!"

She paused, as Valerian thought, on the verge of sobs, and, wishing to comfort her, he took her hands in his own and clasped them close. But the action did not soothe, it only served to heighten the contrast in Arthura's mind. There had been a time when Valerian adored her, and now!

And a thought flashed across her mind that made her brain reel and her knees tremble. What if evil report did reach the ears of Steppie and the children! What if they should discover the truth, the baleful truth she saw as plain as day and believed in!

She had been very dear to Valerian, but he loved her no longer; she had not only forfeited his love, but his esteem.

"I am the stay of the house," she went on. "It would break their hearts to have me thought ill of."

A deep blush burned on her cheek for a moment, leaving her paler than before, and the last words which rang in Valerian's ears for days after were rather a cry of desolation than an appeal to him.

"Oh, Walter! Walter! Walter must never know," she cried. Then she slid down by the side of Valerian's chair for a few moments, sobbing bitterly, unconscious of the cruel world outside her little brother's adoring love. Her passion of grief over, what could Valerian do but entreat forgiveness? She was his own, his very own, he said. All would come right

with them in time. She must love him a thousand times more fondly than ever.

The smiter in his turn was smitten. Valerian's conscience did indeed reproach him for the ill-considered words of a quarter of an hour ago. Arthura let him whisper what he would in her ear, let him clasp her passive hand, then went away without a smile or a word. They could never more be to each other as they once had been. She felt it to be supreme valediction.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

STEPHANA had now reached a crisis in her singular career. She awaited a mandate from the unseen world as confidently as those who live according to ordinary methods look for the usual deliverance from a dilemma, expecting, maybe, the interference of happy chance, maybe a wise counsel of friend, or lastly a clearer understanding on their own part. To Stephana no such solution suggested itself. She should be duly enlightened, but neither from within nor without, as far as the actual world and her own individual life were concerned. The voice, inaudible to others, would reach her obsequious ears from afar. The monition would come from no earthly counselor.

Looking back and recollecting every incident that linked the present with the departure from Italy, she could understand why the last strange summons should have come in the name of Valerian. What an errand was hers! To force a lie into the light from a darkness in which it had been hid for years, to bring, as she felt she must and should, mother and son together, to sway two mundane natures to her will, and touch their careless spirits to finer issues: here, indeed, was a mission that might well claim her life for a time. But for a time only. Stephana looked far beyond the horizon of an existence that should mean fireside concord and a perfect harmony between Christina, Valerian, and herself. When the looked-for reconcilment had been brought about between these two, and her own relations with Valerian determined for once and for all, then, and not till then, should she begin to live indeed.

Her soul exulted and her heart danced as she contemplated this prospect, for she saw now how her supreme wishes and

most cherished ideals might one by one be realized. Unworldly though she was, she knew well enough that wealth is the key to most doors, and that the would-be regenerator of his age and benefactor of his kind must possess not only Will, but Power, the spirit to stir the few, and the material force to move the many. She was already rich, Christina was richer still, and their combined fortunes would form a mighty engine indeed, if only Valerian could be taught to work it aright. Sitting down deliberately to count up the aggregate of Christina's fortune and her own, Stephana's eyes grew almost supernaturally bright, and her pale cheeks glowed with exultation. Could she only sway Christina and Valerian to her purpose, not one of the magnanimous schemes she had dreamed of need be given up. The accumulated hoardings of the Hermitage-Gossip house would at last be appropriated to noble uses. One chapter of their family history, and that a sordid one, would be thus closed forever, and a shining page begun. "I do believe your riches burden you as much as an evil conscience. It is no crime to be born a millionaire!"

Miss Hermitage had often made this remark to Stephana, and in a measure it was true. The enormous and for the most part idly squandered wealth of her kinsfolk did lie like a heavy weight on Stephana's mind. She could not charge herself with undue softness and luxurious living, and Mr. Constantine's money had served the public weal rather than his own interests. But the expensive, the lavish Christina! The wine that sparkled in her crystal, the outlandish cates that furnished her table, the gauds, the frivolities, the merry-making from day to day! Such a spectacle filled her with a feeling akin to despair. And although she exuberated now in the thought that this had come to an end, and that at least Christina's life would never be child's play any more, she could not yet see how all the rest that she hoped for was to come to pass. How was this hard nature to be made malleable, this iron will to be subdued? But Christina at one with her; Christina moved to an unselfish or single-minded impulse! Then Stephana's own path as a social reformer would be smoothed, and not one of her bright dreams but might be realized.

Two immediate purposes, therefore, at this moment occupied Stephana's thoughts. She must first reach Christina's conscience, then touch her heart; begin by reconciling her with God, and end by reconciling her with Valerian. All as yet was dark about her path; Christina was feeble, fretful, yield-

ing in small things, but unapproachable on the subject of her private affairs and Valerian. For the first time in her life Stephana failed to fascinate and influence as she willed. That strange power exercised by her over her fellows, and hitherto regarded by all who knew her as irresistible, seemed inert or inadequate. Less the power than the will, indeed, was with Stephana now. She felt strangely alienated from her kinswoman, just when excessive pitifulness would have served her purpose better. One of those subtle antipathies witnessed among blood relations was at work here, and, do what she would, Stephana could not wholly overcome it. Then it came about that her eyes seemed cold, her voice unsympathetic to Christina. The wondrously insinuating sweetness and soothingness that had always appeared part of Stephana's self were gone, and a certain pensiveness had overtaken her. The cheerfulness, the animation, the subdued fire of other days were vanished also.

"We are all very dull," said Miss Hermitage one day. "I do wish, Stephana, you would persuade your blind friend Mr. Markham to accompany Colette and myself to Italy. Italy always amuses me, and Mr. Markham is poor. He would consent, I feel sure."

Stephana suddenly became her old sportive, seductive self. "Dear Christina," she said, seating herself at her cousin's feet, and holding her hands, "will you let me cozen you into one thing, a very little thing for you? Mr. Markham will do anything I ask him. But I must be bribed into the asking."

"You want money out of me for what you call your causes," Miss Hermitage replied, smiling ironically. "Well, how much? A hundred pounds?"

"The cost of one of your gala gowns—a few exotics! Is Mr. Markham's company worth no more?" Stephana continued, still gay and genial. "No, cousin, a hundred pounds is so small a sum to you that it is not worth bargaining for. What I want now is no more nor less than five thousand pounds."

"You are dreaming!" Christina retorted, with scorn. "Much good would five thousand pounds do in your hands! Philanthropy does no good. We see this every day. The more rich people give away, the more poor ones there are."

"There are other things to be given away besides soup tickets and flannel petticoats," Stephana replied, in her turn caustic and bitter. "Though I do not know that money is

worse squandered on these than on strawberries at Christmas," she added, with a playful scorn. "Then you will not give me five thousand pounds?"

"You are dreaming," was the ironical reply. "But to be serious. Write to Mr. Markham. Make the proposal to him. I must have him in Italy."

But Stephana shook her head.

"It is really very unkind of you, Stephana," said Miss Hermitage, fretfully. "You really seem to take pleasure in thwarting me, although you are amiable to every one else. I will write to Constantine, then. He can surely find some one entertaining and clever to go with us to Italy."

"You will not think me unkind when you know everything," Stephana answered. "I can not tell you yet."

"Always dark and oracular! Well, Colette shall have my trunk packed, and off we will go by ourselves. This humdrum life is killing me."

No more was said. Preparations were made for the Italian journey, and it seemed to Stephana that all chance of the desired reconciliation was over, at least for a time. The travelers proposed to start in a few days, not to return till the spring, and where then would they find Valerian? Not in England, certainly, thought Stephana; and as she pondered on what had just taken place, the first strange phase of the life she had planned by Valerian's side wore a look of comfort. Under no large Southern stars and warm azure skies, amid no orange and lemon groves, should their days be spent, islanded from ice and frost and common cares. A hard lot for a while must they lead, yet as she pictured it now her heart bounded. At least there would be sympathy in that home in store for her, the serviceableness born of joy and gratitude. The devotion that breathed through every line of Valerian's letters augured well for the future. He loved her, and she could only give a hearty affection in return. But had either of them a right to be dissatisfied with such a compact? The best part of life is made up of thought and deed, not sentiment, held Stephana.

"I have had my romance, my delusion. He insists on having his. 'Twere hard were we not henceforth able to leave off dreaming, and live indeed."

CHAPTER XXXV.

It was the eve of Christina's departure. The trunks were packed. The courier had arrived. The paragon of a cicerone found by Mr. Constantine was expected every moment. At noon the next day the little party, consisting of half a dozen persons, would be on the road.

Miss Hermitage had not been so enterprising since the occurrences of New-Year's Day. She still liked travel for travel's sake. Novelty in the most ordinary circumstance diverted her. A prospect pleased, if for no other reason, because she gazed on it for the first time. The serving-maids who waited on her for a day only were always delightful.

Unaccustomed meats, irrespective of quality, tickled her palate. In fact, like many another, she would have declared life perfect if no day ever resembled its predecessor. The mere prospect of getting away from England, even now, was alone enough to put her in spirits. She was leaving Stephana and Valerian behind, and in Italy there would be no embodiments of Conscience and Retribution. There her history, past and present, could concern no one. In whatever delicious place she might halt, she was but one rich woman more, to be welcomed and pampered and bent knee to accordingly. Travel, if it does nothing else for us, at least brings out the amiable aspect of money. Wit, beauty, distinction, all outward insignia, vanish. We are mere money-spenders, not men or women, hardly human beings.

Picturing to herself all the pleasant little nothings that were now to be her daily portion, Miss Hermitage was suddenly discomposed by one of those phenomenal storms that happen from time to time in midwinter, sleet and hail coming close upon thunder and lightning, and a lurid sky and heavy air oppressing us when the logs crackle on the hearth. Miss Hermitage could never relish storms. She liked nature, as well as human kind, to be always in a bright, careless mood. A summer tempest in February seemed, moreover, so abnormal as to prognosticate evil haps. There were the cold white flakes falling and the lightning ablaze at the same moment, whilst the iciness of the atmosphere was suddenly turned to sultriness and languor.

"I am suffocating. Will no one relieve me by opening the window?" she cried, fretfully.

Colette and the maids flew to do her behest, but it was

beyond their power. A wild wind sent the sleet swirling madly in all directions, and drove it through every aperture into the room. It was necessary to make the windows doubly secure. Some dire mischief seemed imminent. Not only the especial congeries of buildings in which they lived, but the whole town, seemed threatened by the storm. Wind and thunder, hail and waves—for the sea was in hearing—made up a horrid tumult, whilst the vivid flashes of lightning but heightened the prevailing gloom. It was broad daylight, yet it was night. The dog-days had come in winter.

Miss Hermitage knew no fear, but the storm perturbed her, and gave a sensation of eeriness. She could not shake off the rustic superstitiousness in which she had been brought up, and which ever associated phenomenal occurrences with especial interpositions of the Divine displeasure. This terrific hurricane she knew could but be working all kinds of disaster by land and sea, and why should it happen just when she was on the point of hiding herself from conscience and duty, fleeing from these to lazy pleasures? Must there not be some visitation here, some portent pointed at herself? The rocking of this solidly built house on its very foundations, the din and clatter within, the elemental hurly-burly without, not frightening her in themselves, inspired a terror of another kind. The voice of the thunder reached her inner ear. The lightning endowed her with spiritual vision. Yes, she saw it now. Stephana was right. She had been wicked toward Valerian. She must make atonement. It was characteristic of Christina that such thoughts should not have troubled her till now, and that so long as she felt her secret absolutely safe she was in no wise concerned herself about the sin. It happened in her case as it often will, that the verdict of others made the wrong-doing apparent, and brought conviction to the culprit. She had seen her conduct in its proper light by the aid of Stephana's rebuke. Yet until now, although humiliated and put out of countenance by good opinions forfeited and daily existence unhinged, the lapse in itself had brought no contrition. The unpleasant consequences lost to sight, she should go on living after the old plan, she said to herself, and the world would be as easy and agreeable as if there were no Valerian in it.

Swiftly and unawares, however, by means not of human suasion or interference, but, as she interpreted it, an awful monition of nature, she was troubled with a feeling akin to remorse. She should start for Italy on the morrow all the

same ; she felt no qualms of conscience at quitting Valerian without a word of advice ; but she would make some sort of satisfaction to Stephana. All the money she wanted, as Miss Hermitage supposed, for Valerian, she should have, and that ungrudgingly. "Where is Stephana? Will no one bring Stephana to me?"

The query was made in a pettish voice again and again, but without response. The appalling nature of the storm, indeed, and its extraordinary grandeur as a spectacle, were occupying the minds of her household. The men had so far forgotten decorum as to quit their posts and seek some better vantage-ground out-of-doors ; the women had separated into detachments, the timid hiding themselves in the cellars, the valorous watching the lightning on the sea from the attics. Formerly, and under ordinary circumstances, Miss Hermitage would have overlooked such neglect, for she was the easiest task-mistress in the world, always making allowance for her servants when in quest of amusement. The more amusement they got, the better their work was done, she would say. But she was no longer her old self. The shock of that unforgettable New-Year's Day had left her nerveless and feeble ; it seemed a personal grievance to be thus left alone when every storm gust threatened to force in the windows or bring down the tiles. She was shivering from cold, too, for the fire had been allowed to burn low, and the oppressiveness of a quarter of an hour ago was changed to chilliness, whilst for a few minutes the flashes of lightning were awful in their vividness. Not twice in a lifetime do we behold a like spectacle, the broad span of heavens and the troubled deep as if in one vast conflagration, hardly a perceptible interval between blaze and blaze, hardly a lull between peal and peal, heralds it might be of doom to many both on land and sea.

Miss Hermitage rang the bell, but that summons was unnoticed ; then she went to the foot of the stairs and called Colette, but no Colette came. Something must have happened, she now said to herself, some one of her household perhaps had received injury from the lightning. How unkind not to come to her.

In this momentary dejection she for the first time realized the awfulness there may be in solitude. She was troubled in mind, and she was alone. What if harm had happened to Colette? She should then be alone indeed, and alone for the rest of her days as she was at this moment. How different it might have been ! Affection might have been

hers, and all kinds of domestic joys. These things were out of her reach now, but she would fain make her peace with Stephana—Stephana, who understood how the debts of conscience are acquitted; Stephana, who seemed to her imagination an embodiment of Justice blindfold with scale in her hand. Could she but satisfy Stephana, she should be able to enjoy herself in Italy as in the old days.

At last Colette did come, the faithful little woman appearing out of breath and out of countenance.

"Why do you leave me alone!" said Christina, querulously. "You know I am not well. A very little thing upsets me now. And the fire is very low. I am shivering with cold."

"I have been looking for Stephana," replied Colette, apologetically. Then she put a shawl round her friend's shoulders, and piled the fire with logs.

"What is Stephana doing? Why does she not bear us company at such a time?" asked Christina, in the same fretful voice.

"Stephana can not come," Colette said, mysteriously.

"Then let us go to her. Why should she shut herself up in the midst of a storm like this? There is positive danger for every one of us."

Colette still looked enigmatic. "The storm is abating," she said. "I have told the maids to come down-stairs and prepare tea. But Stephana can not come."

"Has anything happened to her, or to anybody in the house?" asked Christina, sharply.

"What should happen?" was the reply, accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders. "We must do without her company for a time. That is all."

"I am sure something strange has come to pass. Am I not to know?"

"Strange things are always coming to pass where Stephana is concerned," Colette made reply, with an odd smile. "Let us take our tea cozily and watch the storm-clouds divide. See the lightning. How it diminishes!"

But Miss Hermitage would not be quieted. She would go to Stephana, she said. Something had happened of which Colette dared not tell.

"Indeed and indeed no harm has come to her," Colette replied. Then finding that the other was determined to see for herself, she followed her upstairs.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THERE are certain temperaments without doubt so sensitive to atmospheric changes as to give credence to, if not to warrant, the strange theories formed on the subject, and Stephana's was one of these. The superlative grandeur of the storm acted no less upon her imagination than the phenomenal conditions accompanying it, affecting her physical powers. For a brief spell she surrendered herself to a double influence, the one rendering her mental faculties abnormally alert, the other diminishing or subduing bodily force, subjecting it momentarily, not to will, but to something that may be even stronger. At such moments, when given up absolutely to phantasy, spiritual vision, call her mood by what name we please, Stephana would be as unconscious of the actual world as an infant in sweet sleep. The storm having taken possession of her spirit, the physical incumbrance remained inert, and the bodily faculties in abeyance, and although the sublimity and awfulness of nature in this rare mood were apparent to her vaguely as in a dream, to all else she was irresponsive, and indeed insensible. Called by name at such times, she did not hear; wrapt in an ecstasy which others could not understand, she was deaf, blind, mute to the visible material world. And in that dream-world whither none could follow her, she must be waited for as some bird that has soared into cloud-land, but will duly return to its nest. It was this habit of abstraction that perhaps more than any other characteristic made Stephana an enigma to her friends. What could so absorb her mind as to render it dull to actualities; and why should she thus voluntarily lead herself to speculations having such a result? For, said all, she was mistress of herself, she might overcome this mental habit if she would. But Stephana had every reason for encouraging thoughts and fancies more beautiful by far than those steeped in realities. She was a silent poet, one of those choice spirits that are intoxicated with spiritual and intellectual beauty, and at the same time alive in every fibre to the warfare between good and evil disturbing the tranquillity of the world. The loveliness revealed to her inner vision entranced, dazzled; but the sorrow that followed a contemplation of life as it is, dimmed her eyes with tears. Compensatory are ever the higher gifts. If Stephana suffered much more than her fellows because she realized more intensely the bit-

teness of sin and wrong, at the same time hope and goodness shone upon her with intenser, mellower light. She sorrowed more, but who rejoiced with equal favor? And just as the inner vision consoles the poet and reveals to him a world of loveliness that is as a reflex of this, yet far more lovely, so Stephana, poet without a lyre, had consolations for her own special sorrows of which others knew not. When Christina and Colette entered the room, she met them with her usual smile of welcome, and except an extraordinary brightness in her eyes and unusual pallor on her cheeks, there was nothing to denote the crisis through which she had just passed.

"I was coming to you," she said, and again she smiled and looked at each doubtfully, uncertain as to the effect her disclosures might have. Whilst you have been watching the storm and the sea, I have been gazing on light and darkness more awful still. But sit down and I will tell you everything."

The heat, precursor of the tempest, had caused her to exchange her velvet pelisse for a white woolen morning-gown, in which, with her black hair loosened from its comb and falling about her shoulders, and her eyes full of quiet fire, she looked like a priestess fresh from communion with her gods; no pythoness inflamed with wrath and impelled to utter direful malisons was here, rather one of those calm beautiful beings whose mission it was to speak words of benign and hopeful presagement.

"Sit down on each side of me," she said, all expansiveness and *douceur*; "you shall hear what I have seen."

The pair obeyed, not loath. It was the first time that Stephana had opened her lips to either on the subject of her dreams and phantasies, and now she sat down and told her story as if it were an ordinary narrative.

"The storm came upon me quite by surprise, as it must have done on yourselves," she said, leaning forward in her chair, and seeming to see the things she described. "I had thrown off my heavy gown and opened my window, overcome by the sudden sultriness, when a wondrous flash of lightning—such a flash as I had never before witnessed—drove me back. I sank into my chair, trembling, not with fear, but with emotion. The sight of the dark sea and the lightning playing upon it was so majestic, so indescribably awful! The present and all that was taking place now passed from my ken. I gazed, but not on tangible things; I hearkened, but to no earthly voice."

She covered her eyes as if to shut out all that could interfere with the vividness of the mental picture she was drawing, and went on :

"It was as if the fair race of the earth had vanished from my sight, and instead I saw light and darkness only—light so dazzling, yet so lovely, so splendid, so beneficent, that I seemed now to gaze upon it for the first time, whilst the darkness filled my soul with terror. No words can describe it. A darkness swallowing, ingulfing, every luminous particle that approached it ; a darkness striving to encroach upon the confines of light. As I gazed and gazed I discerned a broad shining track dividing what preshadowed to my mind not only day and night, but life and death, time and eternity. This luminous path, whose end and beginning I could not see, was garlanded on either side by troops of angelic figures. Most beautiful and terrible were they, all those sentineling the kingdom of light being of its very essence, starry, radiant, ineffable, with rays about their seraphic brows, and a whiteness more dazzling than silver or Alpine snow upon their wings, whilst the legion guarding the realms of darkness were as night incarnate, fearful to behold, blackness on their foreheads, ebon of wing, sable-raimented, fit harbingers they of a night that should never see any dawn, children of the Death that has no beginning and no end. I gazed and gazed, and by-and-by discerned the occupation of these angelic battalions. For, gazing down into the abyss in which the fair broad way was lost below, and high into the heavens where it vanished also, I now saw what I can only describe as flames or small wing-like apparitions fluttering upward. Once having made out their presence, as it happens to stargazers, I soon saw twenty where before I had seen but one, and by-and-by the space between the two regions I could see was filled with them : fluttering feebly they came, some lighter and more conspicuous than others, none wholly dark, and each moving hither with free voluntary movements like those of a bird. I discovered also that each of these small wing-like flames was followed by a light and a dark angel, who seemed striving to entice it, and one to the right, the other to the left. As I gazed I discerned that when any one was drawn close to the boundaries of the light or the dark kingdom, straightway it was absorbed. Then the light burned brighter and brighter ; the gloom grew more and more intense. But that especial little flame was lost to sight, merged either in the supernal day or night. Strange and

moving was it to this contest going on, and the transformation brought about, these myriads upon myriads with their attendant ministering spirits, attracted now nearer the light, now toward the borders of darkness, at last absorbed by the one or engulfed into the horrible abyss of the other. There was music too; whence it came I knew not, but it reached my ears from afar, and alternated—now exultant and joyful, a bridal song, a triumphant march, a jubilant chorus; now sad as a dirge or funeral knell, so sad that I wept to hear. I was weeping thus when suddenly I heard a voice anear, and without daring to look up, knew that it was one of the seraphic spirits sent hither to comfort me.

“‘Weep not,’ he said, in a voice sweet but awful. ‘Gaze and be instructed. To the mind of man much of the knowledge he desires is denied him, but thus much know and teach others. In yonder track of light see prefigured human life, which is but a warfare between shining goodness and dark sin, each unit of the multitudes born on earth fighting under one banner or the other. If it is ordained that the life after the tomb remain an enigma to earthly sojourners, and all except life itself mysterious, at least know that the soul vanquished by evil makes the sum of universal darkness vaster and more portentous, whilst the gain of the humblest spirit to truth and loveliness is as another ray of light, beaming not only on this world, but throughout the entire universe, and not only to-day, but always. Ask not, then, earthly, much less heavenly rewards, O children of men. Is it no reward to have added to God’s best gift, man’s best heritage, Light, forever and forever?’”

Little was said at the time, but Christina thanked her cousin warmly, and Colette’s tearful eyes afforded grateful comment. The next morning the projected departure took place without unusually affectionate adieux. About an hour afterward, however, Stephana found a note on her desk. It bore the well-known lozenge, with Christina’s initials and motto underneath. “For one and the world.” There was no letter, but the envelope held merely a slip of paper folded round a check. The draft was for five thousand pounds, and on the slip were written these words, “Save my soul by your prayers.”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A FEW days after these events Valerian suddenly appeared at Steppie's door, just at the time Arthura was at home. Steppie was the first to perceive him in the distance. She was one of those persons who can never so wholly absorb themselves in any occupation as not to see and hear every trifling thing going on around them, and the distant glimpse of Valerian was caught while she busily cast up her housekeeping books.

"Oh!" she said, half crying, "misfortune on misfortune! I said that a series of calamities would happen when I overturned the inkstand on Benjamine's white frock this morning. Mr. Hermitage, Arthura, and the maid out for a holiday, and the drawing-room curtains taken down to be washed, and no fresh butter for tea, and Baby's last clean pinafore stained with blackberry jam, and my best gown at the dressmaker's, and Benjamine's hair in paper for to-morrow's Sunday-school treat, and Walter playing at leap-frog in the streets with the baker's boy! Oh dear! Arthura, you must battle with it. I am ready to sink into the earth."

"Dear little mamma," said Arthura, proudly collected in spite of strange beatings of the heart, "I will let Mr. Hermitage in, and meantime you tidy the children, and bring them down-stairs as soon as you can."

"But for you to answer the door! Let me do it," said Steppie, beseechingly.

"Mr. Hermitage will not expect to see a powdered footman," Arthura made sarcastic reply.

Then came Valerian's knock, and the next moment he stood on the threshold, catching sight of Steppie dragging a child by each hand on the staircase.

The lovers had not met since the painful interview of a few days before, the very thought of which stung Arthura to the quick now. Valerian had wounded her past forgetfulness, if not past forgiveness, she said, and the prospect of a talk with him afforded scant pleasure.

"Can I say a word to you?" he said, glancing at the door.

"Certainly," Arthura replied, and she could not resist a smile in the midst of her bitter thoughts. Who should hear anything they might say, indeed? There were audible indications enough of what was going on in the chamber overhead had not Valerian been too self-absorbed to hear them—Baby

wailing at having her face washed out of season, Benjamine clamoring for a clean tucker, Walter throwing off his shoes, a general running hither and thither, an unlocking of drawers, and a prevailing hubbub and commotion.

Valerian glanced at Arthura's calm face with no little apprehension. He had come to make excuses for himself and to beg pardon for the unwarrantable behavior of the other day; but seeing Arthura's cold, collected demeanor, he hardly knew how to begin. "I have come to say many things to you," he said, not venturing even to repeat the hand-clasp. "First and foremost, I was to blame in saying what I did. Pray think no more of it. Forgive me."

"Certainly," again Arthura said.

To Valerian's ears the word had an ill-omened sound. Arthura was not wont to be monosyllabic. Her speech most often resembled herself—bright, sparkling, individual. But that frigid affirmation!—that "Certainly!"

"When I explain all to you I am sure you will make some excuse for me," he went on, feeling that he must go on whether he made matters better for himself or worse. "I have had many things to harass and perplex me. Let me first of all tell you one. I have come to say good-by for a time. I start to-day and at midnight on a journey to America."

Arthura looked inquisitive, but not melted. Surprise, however, did win from her a genuine exclamation. She forgot for the moment everything but the delightfulness of seeing a new world.

"Are you really going to see America?" she said.

"You speak as if you would like to see it too. And indeed that may well be, some day," Valerian went on, relieved at the sudden naturalness of Arthura's voice and manner. "But I must make haste, my darling; I have so much to say, and so little time to say it in, that I am at my wits' end where to begin. Well, I am going to America on an errand for Stephana, and may be absent three or four months, not more. Her grand schemes you shall hear of in my letters. You will see me back early in the summer. I will write to you by every mail."

Arthura listened with no responsive eagerness, yet kindly, he thought. Yes, she loved him still.

"All sorts of things have happened impossible to write about. Did Mr. Constantine tell you? I am Christina's

son, born of a secret marriage. My name is a humble one, but, such as it is, honestly mine."

That piece of news suddenly gave Arthura real pleasure. Her cheeks showed gratulatory blushes. Her eyes sparkled.

"I had not heard a word of this. I am glad indeed," she said.

"The revelation has not mended my fortunes as yet," Valerian went on, grimly. "What my mother's intentions are I know not, but at present I am a mere pensioner on her bounty. I must make my own way."

Arthura broke in with flaming cheeks and hot tears.

"You are going to America on Stephana's account. Tell me the truth, Valerian. Are you going to marry her? Mr. Constantine says so."

Valerian looked ruffled and discomposed, but recovering himself in a moment, pleaded his cause with wonderful dexterity.

"Listen to me, my dearest," he said, speaking in a low, confidential voice, and persuading himself that things were with them as in the sweet French days. "Long before I saw you I gave Stephana to understand that if she could ever marry again I should be proud to make her my wife. It was a bold proposition on my part, but she was ever so beautifully kind to me, and so gracious withal, that in any case I felt sure of giving no offense. There was no question of love, only cousinly affection, and (at least on one side) an esteem almost reaching to veneration. You know Stephana, who can resist her?"

"Who, indeed?" Arthura exclaimed, still agitated. "If Stephana now wishes it, you will marry her."

Valerian laughed scornfully, at the same time not loath to let his supposititious infidelity take the shape of fatalism.

"No," he said, speaking slowly, as if anxious for each word to dwell in her memory like a promise. "I shall marry you, or no woman. But for a time I am in a charmed circle. I do Stephana's bidding whether I will or no. You can not suppose that I wished to undertake this journey to America, and thus absent myself from you and keep my future plans in abeyance for three months. But I can not refuse Stephana, firstly because she casts a sort of glamour over me, and secondly because she is my good genius, the best friend (I am here speaking from a worldly point of view) I possess. If ever justice is rendered me by my mother it will be Stephana's work."

Arthura was silent. Valerian could not tell whether or no he had convinced her. She did not indeed know herself. But he certainly had made some kind of explanation.

"You see, my own love," he went on, "I am driven against my inclinations to accept Stephana's behests. What have we two but Love and Hope, and who can live upon these alone? Do not be cast down. I am sure that all will come right in time. Only you must think kindly of me and believe in me. Promise that."

He drew her toward him and kissed her on the eyes, a true-lover's kiss, but it hardly cheered Arthura. She sat still, looking on the ground.

"It makes you happy to be with Mr. Constantine?" he said, after a time. "You will write to me cheerfully. And who knows how soon Fortune may smile on us after my return, how speedily we may be able to realize our wishes! You do love me, you do forgive me, do you not? I hardly knew what I was saying when I spoke so roughly to you, your coming was such a surprise and such a vexation, seeing how ready the world is to rail at those who disregard it. But all is with us as before, now is it not?"

He looked into her eyes with a lover's admiration, certainly without a lover's confidence. How superb in her girlish bloom and strength was this once sparkling, audacious Arthura! All the strength was still there, the self-reliance, the courage, the will, but something was wanting he fain would see.

"Say that it is so or that it shall be so," he said, desperately. He had never been more in love with her in his life. "I need not say it to you, who love her, Stephana's designs, spells, if you will, are all beneficent. But were it otherwise, were the toils spread about me wizardry indeed, I would break them for your sake. Over my love for you she has no power."

Just then there was a clamor of children's voices at the door. Their interview was at an end.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"WILL not Mr. Hermitage have some tea? It is quite ready."

For it was Steppie who had entered, followed by the chil-

dren, all beautifully dressed in honor of their guest, Steppie herself looking too youthful to be the mother of the tall girl clinging to her skirts.

“Come, children, you remember Mr. Hermitage, who pulled Benjamine out of the water at Margate? Say how d’ye do?” she said.

Then the little party went into the next room, Steppie presiding over the tea-pot, Valerian cutting bread and butter for the children with charming urbanity, Arthura growing genial by Walter’s side.

“I must congratulate you on your improved appearance,” Valerian said, addressing himself to Steppie. “You were so ailing at Margate. It does credit to the London climate.”

Steppie’s complexion, fairest of the fair, showed to-day a tinge of rose; she looked, as she was, indeed, in blooming health.

“Ah!” she replied, sighing, “it is my misfortune to look well. No one pities me for my poor health and low spirits.”

“My dear madam,” said Valerian, “you are really deceiving yourself. There is no such thing as low spirits.”

“I wish I could think so,” was Steppie’s desponding answer. “Were it not for low spirits I could be the happiest creature in the world. I was born with a melancholy name—Sadgrove. But when I changed it matters did not mend at all.”

“The fact is,” Valerian went on, “you but mistake the effect for the cause—low spirits for the misfortune that produced them. Now I will tell you, with your permission, how you may get rid of this incubus.”

“Do! do!” cried Walter, clapping his hands. “Oh, Mr. Hermitage, if you cured mamma of her low spirits we should all jump for joy.”

“My pathology is of the simplest,” went on Valerian. “Of course we all know that nothing goes wrong without a cause. When a wheel creaks we oil the spring; when we break a leg we get a surgeon to set it. And so it is with what we call low spirits. We either want a doctor to physic us, or we drink a kind of water that disagrees with us, or we sit in a room that does not get sun enough. The consequence is some bodily disorder, which straightway, because we don’t know its name, we call low spirits.”

“Let us get mamma a different kind of water to drink,” shouted Walter,

"You must try, not one remedy, but all," Valerian went on, speaking with perfect gravity. "Some people cure themselves of low spirits by chopping wood; their muscles are called into play, and the exhilaration extends to the mind. I knew one lady who was restored by going every day for a month to a children's hospital, and amusing the little patients by making grimaces. She quite lost the habit of looking woe-begone, and found that it had been nothing but a habit."

"But to rise every morning with the feeling that life is a burden?" asked poor Steppie. "I should like to get up as gay as a lark."

"Will you let me advise you?" asked Valerian. "Then lose not a moment, join an amateur dramatic society. You would be obliged to play a variety of parts, and would soon begin to regard them as real. So, if you were melancholy one day, at least you would be gay the next."

"That's a good idea," Arthura said. "Yes, little mamma, we will do it. It will amuse us all."

"I am sure I hope so," Steppie made pensive reply.

Nevertheless, she brightened up whilst the subject was being discussed, and promised to learn a part, if Arthura would arrange everything. Valerian had given a happy turn to the conversation. And when he rose to go, after the friendliest meal, with such kindly admonitions to Steppie on the care of her health, such genial interest in the children, such affectionate appeal to Arthura—they had one moment on the threshold to themselves—how could she choose but believe him? He loved her. He would be true to her. Absence would draw them nearer to each other.

That night before Arthura returned to her post Steppie caught her hands, and whispered, reproachfully: "Oh, Arthura, why did you never tell me? Mr. Valerian is in love with you. You two will surely be married some day."

Arthura flung her arms round her step-mother's neck with tears and blushes. "Dear little mamma, he made me promise never to tell. That is why. It made me very unhappy to deceive you, but I could not help it."

"I like Mr. Valerian; I am very glad," was all Steppie could say, as she fondly caressed the clinging girl.

"You like him, yes, but will he be good to me?" Arthura asked. "You are more experienced than I. Tell me, Steppie, may a woman trust a man? Are his words to be relied on like Scripture?—the words he says when he is in love, I mean."

"Your papa was true and tender as a woman," answered Steppie. "But for the rest I can not answer. I have all my life long been terribly afraid of men. I should never have married at all but for your poor papa's persuasions."

"You were happy?" asked Arthura.

"No, I was never what is called happy in my life; but that was not your poor papa's fault. Had I cried for the moon he would have fetched it down for me—"

"Or tried to do so," put in Arthura.

"Yes, that is what I mean. There are husbands who will do that, you know, and others who will not."

"And do you think Valerian belongs to the former category, little mamma?"

"Ah! you put me a hard question. But you would never cry for the moon, I am sure."

"Would Valerian be kind?"

"What matter so long as you are not foolish?" was Steppie's reply; and so they parted.

"Hoity, toity, turn!" was Mr. Constantine's exclamation as Arthura entered his room precisely at twelve of the clock. "Well, my Prospera, there is one who wields a mightier wand than any of us. Stephana has got five thousand pounds out of Christina, as I live! 'Tis past belief! 'Tis miraculous! 'Tis witchcraft! But 'tis true. I have myself seen the check."

And tidings heaped upon tidings.

"Valerian lunched with me to-day, and is off to-night to Liverpool, there to set sail for America."

Arthura waited expectantly. Doubtless she was to hear that part of Valerian's story he lacked time to tell.

"If it were not for my fourscore and odd years, I would willingly go too. For," added the old man, leaning forward, and speaking with unusual fire and animation, "the world may call Stephana mad, and her schemes froth and emptiness; but mark me, my Prospera, 'tis she who alone is sane, and the rest of us brainless idiots. Let their detractors rave as they will at her Utopias beyond seas, I, for one, as I sink into the grave, will raise my voice on her behalf. Have you heard nothing?"

"Nothing of Stephana's schemes, sir."

"Five thousand pounds! Hum! I wonder how the little woman felt when the tooth was drawn out! Matchless incomparable Stephana! Five thousand pounds from Christina, as I live! Well, my dear, they'll call Stephana mad, but never mind—we will drink to the health of her earthly par-

adise. Valerian's errand, then, is to choose some fair tract in America which Stephana means to colonize (she gives ten thousand pounds herself, but that is a drop in the ocean to Christina's five), and the colonists she sends thither will find themselves in a strange world, as the gay Greek and his companions who were whisked up to the moon. Poor little London children!—o call a garden their own, to find apples ripening in the sun for them! Seven Dials, then, or at least a section of it, is to be transported beyond sea; houses and lands—we may indeed say souls and bodies—given to those who have hitherto been but misery incarnate. But more to-morrow. It wearies me to talk."

Arthura read a page or two, but Mr. Constantine was too full of Stephana and her schemes to listen just yet.

"Remember my words when I am out of your sight, as I must soon be. Stephana may fail, may do foolish things with wisest intent; but she has caught the spirit of the age to come. She realizes the moral standard of the future. For first have we seen Force putting the chaos of human society into order; next, Charity working blindly enough, yet alleviating the sum total of misery. Now has come the turn of sovereign Justice, of Conscience instead of Self, to speak to each man's soul, and make him feel the full measure of his own responsibility as an inheritor of the past, an enricher or despoiler of the future. Ah me! Would I were younger! Yes, this is the real sadness of dying, the bitterness of the grave. Just as the world is slipping from under our feet we see the dawn of the better day we have struggled for and believed in. But your wand, my good Prospera; waft me far from realities into shadowland. Away! away!"

Soon he was drowsing indeed, and Arthura stole away, not herself to sleep till the cold wintry morning dawned grayly and the foggy streets were astir. What is outward gloom to a young hopeful heart?

The first sight that caught her eyes was a letter lying on the table, a last farewell from Valerian penciled as he drove to the railway station. "Yes," the girl said to herself, "I must, I will forgive him, since he loves me still." She sat down and wrote a note, to await him on his arrival, that should at least atone for the coldness and unbendingness of yesterday. "What am I," she thought, "that I should set myself against forgiveness?"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SUMMER had come, and of the four million hearts beating in London none exulted like Stephana's. Her fondest wishes were about to be realized. Valerian, having successfully accomplished his mission, was on his way home. Christina would also reach England in a day or two, and was willing to be reconciled to her son. Her blind friend Markham had fulfilled the behest laid upon him, and found a thousand families willing to go unto

"an isle as yet unknown,
And yet far kinder than their own."

A week more, and the ship chartered to transport her colonists to the New World would set sail.

Such a departure was not to be passed over as an event without a meaning, and that somber old Kensington mansion, with its lawns and shrubberies, before dedicated by Stephana to more solemn uses, was now to be given up to an exuberance of felicity. A place of reconciliations, a place of benison, consecrated to hope, trust, and thanksgiving; surely here, if anywhere, should joy bells peal on the summer air, banners wave in the blue sky, garlands within vie with the bowers without, and loud triumphant music dwindle the noises of every day.

Stephana loved the display that symbolizes a generous truth, and she was now spending upon a single entertainment as much money as Christina in her palmy days had spent upon a season. What indeed with the guests about to take up their abode in the house and those invited for the festival, the sumptuary business alone was onerous, but a bagatelle compared to the less substantial part of the celebration. It must be brilliant, it must be emblematic, it must be picturesque, and as no Valerian was by to anticipate her wishes, she had to do the imaginative part herself, and finding such subordinates as she could. Song, dance, a fairy masque or allegory, these formed but a part of the programme which was to be carried out on really a splendid scale, and the whole ending with a banquet under tents.

Busiest of the busy, Stephana yet found time for audiences, one visitor after another being admitted to the presence-chamber. The first to come was Markham. Alas for the eye that could not behold his sovereign lady then! The

mistress of the house, unable to lose a moment of the too precious time slipping away before the eventful day, was occupied in making angels' wings—emblematic employment for one who only wanted wings herself to be mistaken for a seraphic being. The whole picture was lost to her blind adorer, but let us console ourselves with the thought that maybe he conjured up a vision even lovelier. Stephana no longer wore white for mourning, but over her morning dress, pure as snow, had thrown a shawl of the warm red color worn by blissful angels in old pictures. The richness of this glowing scarf, contrasting as it did so strongly with the clear paleness of her complexion, lent almost an unearthliness to the calm pure features and the dark eyes now full of repose. She had carelessly placed on the back of her chair the last piece of handiwork, veritable wings, pearly, iridescent, ethereal, although fashioned by human hands, and of celestial down. Winged then she was indeed, a fair apparition alighted, as it seemed, for a moment only, ready the next to wing upward flight.

But Markham, whatever pictures he may have had before his inner eye, saw not this one. Only the sweetness of Stephana's voice reached him where he sat.

"What ought not I to do for you?" she began, gayly, "you who have moved mountains for me. But I am ungrateful of the ungrateful. Expect scant thanks."

He sighed. "Thank me as little as you please, only do not banish me from your presence."

"What can you do for me?" asked Stephana, in the same bright manner. Then recalled to the painful thought the speech might call up in her listener's mind, she added: "One thing already occurs to me out of a thousand. You can hear my maskers repeat their parts. A rehearsal is to take place this very afternoon, and no one is here to give judgment on it. And then—and then— But let us talk for a little first. Report on your mission."

"Do not hurry me, dearest lady," he said, with a little sigh of satisfaction. "The work of months can not be told in as many minutes."

"Hold this ribbon for me, then," laughingly interposed Stephana. "Let it slip gently from your fingers as I draw it. That is right. Now begin."

Well pleased, he began:

"You will not be surprised to learn that I found some difficulty in convincing these good people of your favorite dictum—the Golden Age lies before us, and not behind.

Indeed, they would have nothing to say to a Golden Age at all. Some thought me mad. Others a charlatan or a knave. None at first regarded me as their well-wisher. I had been their friend once, when I sat down in courts and alleys and told stories. But now that I wanted something of them 'twas a wholly different matter—so hard is it for any ill-used human being to credit another with a perfectly disinterested motive."

"My poor friend!" ejaculated Stephana. "You were not reviled, hooted, pelted with mud?"

The blind man smiled pathetically. "My misfortune protected me. Had I been as others are I might not now live to tell the tale. At first, then, the apostle of your Golden Age was only scoffed at for his pains. My best friends of the crowded London courts listened in contemptuous silence. The wags made fun of me. The cynical jeered. All rebelled against the good fortune you would fain force upon them. But as soon as one fact became clear, and the guiding principle of your scheme was made plain as day, then the tide turned."

He touched with one hand a roll of parchment that he had deposited by his side on entering.

"It was a happy thought of yours to exact some title of honor, some proof, if not of gentle birth, at least of nature's nobility, from these poor folks. To be sent into a new country and made a man of because you have only one shirt to your back is a kindness that humiliates. To be promised food and shelter for your children because you have not been able to provide them yourself galls even whilst it brings a sense of relief. But to be made to feel that, naked as you are, and starving and desolate, you have yet earned these things! Ah, the blood tingles proudly then! The eyes no longer seek the ground; the man feels himself a man indeed."

He unrolled the parchment on his knee, and, as if he knew its contents by heart, with one hand holding Stephana's ribbon, the other fingering the scroll, went on:

"I have had the list made out alphabetically for the sake of convenience, but let your eyes light where they will you are sure to find a bit of writing emblazoned in colors and gold. This is one. I know it comes almost first in the list: "John Ames, waterman, married, nine children, jumped into the river on the occasion of a collision, at imminent peril of life and limb, and rescued a fellow-waterman from

destruction.' Another should be here: 'Alice Ashe, seamstress, unmarried, unfortunate, supported by her toil a paralyzed child, not kith and kin, a neighbor's dying bequest, for eight years.' A third is not far off: 'Thomas Beamish, no occupation in particular, but brought up a porter, married, seven children, nursed one neighbor after another when an epidemic raged in the court, and although up night after night, refused a halfpenny.' Yet one more: 'Ralph Calderund, tailor, fathered the starved, ill-used child of bad neighbors, although he had four of his own.' And yet a last: 'Peter Clarke, a shoe-black, fought another lad for ill-using a stray dog, and took charge of it, although half starving himself.'"

Stephana smiled, though tears were in her eyes.

"You have got together a band of heroes," she said.

"Alas! no. But what other heroism can one expect? These poor people, then, when they discovered that none would be sent to the New World at your expense, there to found a family, without some kind of claim to such exceptional good fortune, became converts to the notion at once. It was no longer an affair of government emigration and pauperism. The good deed, the chivalrous act, the sober career, and the—note well!—the intellectual supremacy were to be rewarded. A certain Job Fearon you will find somewhere chosen for having invented a new button—a button to be the savior of human temper henceforth and forever; once on, this immortal button can never come off, be it from shirt, sark, or simarre. Well, the chosen were now envied, the rest moved to emulation. I could have found you twenty thousand candidates instead of one."

"Has every name its blazonry?" asked Stephana; "each man, woman, and child such title of honor?"

"Yes; there must be prizes for every one in our school. To create no jealousies, I have had the qualifications of every head of a family printed in gold and colors, although I was obliged to make certain negations stand for virtues; for instance, the fact of never having been in prison, never having begged in the public streets, and many others. But some day you must go over the list."

"And are they happy?" asked Stephana. "Does the prospect of well-being warm their hearts?"

"Ah! easier is it to make the wilderness to blossom as the rose than to make hope grow suddenly in the place of despair!

But have no fear. All will go well if we do not run into extremes, and materialize instead of elevate."

Stephana was silent for a minute or two. Then she asked, still speaking in the same elate tone—her voice seemed almost strange to him in its joyousness: "Your heart is in this work, is it not? You will soon visit your little colony?"

He grew on a sudden gloomy almost to moroseness. "After so many months absence, may I not at least enjoy your company for a little while? Have others so absorbed you that you have no room in your heart even for a faithful friend?"

The implied reference to Valerian was not to be misunderstood, but Stephana felt just now too happy to be even so disturbed.

"Let us think of nothing, talk of nothing, but this most joyful event," she said, in her sweetest manner. "You will come every day till it is over. You will help me as you are doing now."

"I own the unwinding of ribbon is an occupation I delight in," answered Markham, not without a touch of good-natured irony. "But there are other things I have learned without eyes."

"Your accomplishments shall all be called into requisition by turns. But there is the luncheon bell. We will lunch without loss of time, and then, if you will preside in my place at the rehearsal, you will render a service indeed."

She freed herself from her silver and rainbow-colored wings, and taking his hand, led him into the dining-room, fragrant with freshly cut roses.

The repast was gay and charming. Markham's composure was fortunately not disturbed by the sight of a third cover. It had been laid for Valerian, whose arrival might now be momentarily expected.

Like Markham, he had accomplished his mission, but, unlike Markham, he was looking for reward.

CHAPTER XL.

THE expected arrivals, however, did not take place that day, nor yet the next. When the morning of Stephana's fête dawned neither Christina nor Valerian had appeared. No wonder that a smile of dismay rose to Stephana's lips as she

reviewed all she must do in one short day: receive a long-absent lover, bring about a difficult reconciliation between the mother and son, entertain a thousand and odd guests, preside at a long and ceremonious banquet, deliver a farewell discourse, and now many more duties lay to hand! But she was too happy to do more than smile at such a prospect. She had, indeed, never in her whole life felt so buoyed up with hope and joy. Looking back on the occurrences of the last few months, it seemed to her as if Heaven had been almost too kind, and some cloud must soon obscure this dazzling sky, or else the poets had not fabled who sang so movingly of man's allotted bliss on earth. What had she willed or even desired but was about to come to pass? One of the many darling schemes of years was already in part realized; for, happen what might, now at least she had rescued a thousand souls from a life, if not of despair, without looking forward. The fair world was about to smile upon a thousand more of her brothers and sisters, and one other spot in it transformed into a sphere of free manly struggle and endeavor. This achieved, how many other tasks she had to do!

Nor did it please Stephana less to contemplate the deed as part of Christina's doing, and the effect to-day's events might have upon her cousin's mind. Christina was to be brought face to face for the first time with the philanthropy that wears the shape of a conviction and a brotherhood. She had given alms all her lifetime; to-day she was to learn the meaning of poverty, and also of brotherly love. Would her mind be impressed? Stephana hardly knew.

There was, of course, another person uppermost in Stephana's mind that morning as she so beautifully arrayed herself for the matchless celebration. Valerian—how was it with him? Here she could but indulge in the brightest hopes also, for Valerian's service had of late not been of the lips only. He had shown her by the devotion of the past few months that he was willing to share her aspirations as well as her fortunes, and that to the best of his ability, if not as yet from the heart, he would further every one of her schemes for the amelioration of their fellows.

But devotion of another kind?—how was Stephana's mind affected at the notion that Valerian was come home, a happy lover, to claim the guerdon of his mistress's hand? She could here accord Valerian praise only. His letters, whilst breathing the most loyal devotion, were all that she could desire—reserved, dignified, respectful. The fact is, he had obeyed

her injunctions to the letter, writing rather as a kinsman and a friend than a suitor.

Judging Valerian by his deeds and his written words only, therefore, Stephana felt more confident in him than she had ever been, and so kindlier toward him too. Yes, he would make an admirable steward of her fortunes, and a tower of strength, by virtue of his worldly wisdom and shrewdness, to a dreamer like herself. She should not regret the promise she had made him, although it must sever her from another friend dearer still. Every heart, indeed, was to be made happy but Markham's. This last thought was soon put away, for, after all, reasoned Stephana, my friendship shall do almost as much for him as love could do, had I love to give. With such thoughts as these, Stephana dressed herself almost like a bride, but for spiritual, not earthly bridals. This pure white robe, these white flowers on her bosom and in her hair, were worn for no love that claimed her as its own, no union of heart and heart, rather for the infinite love she bore all the world, and the marriage of hope and joy in a thousand hearts about to be celebrated that day. Most beautiful she looked when at last she came out of her chamber, "a spirit, and yet a woman too." To-day, in spite of that joyousness beaming in her eyes and playing about her lips, the spirit predominated over the woman. Hardly Stephana's self seemed there, rather some starry apparition that wore her likeness, destined to vanish with the rare occasion calling it into being.

If Stephana's brain was busy while she thus lingered in her tiring-chamber, what shall we say of the thousand and odd invited guests occupied at the same time in a similar manner? Christina, Valerian, Arthura, had their own thoughts, not to speak of the rest of Stephana's expected visitors. The day was to be an epoch in the lives of every one.

"Oh, Arthura," cried Steppie, as she went up stairs to dress first the children and then herself, "I feel so happy—I mean so miserable! I should be overjoyed to play the part of Hope in Stephana's allegory. But my heart is heavy as lead."

"You had better leave it at home, then, little mamma," Arthura said, her own heart now beating with wild hopes, now sinking within her. "We must be happy to-day, whether we will or no. It is our duty."

"I am sure I always try to do my duty," sighed poor Steppie. "And I certainly have felt less depressed since beginning to learn the part of Hope in the masque. I have even felt sometimes as if my low spirits were going altogether, and

I was turning into a kind of Hope. Only to-day the old feeling comes back. I could sit down and cry. What if I should break down?"

"People never do break down," Arthura said, authoritatively. "You could not break down if you tried. The words will come of their own accord, as they do to actors on the stage."

"Well, actors do not break down, certainly," Steppie said, drying her eyes, for a tear or two had come. "And I suppose some are as nervous as myself."

"Everybody is nervous, of course," again urged Arthura—"the Queen when she reads her speech, the speakers in the House of Commons, the judge—but they say what they have to say, so really nervousness is of no consequence."

"Then you do not think that my tongue will cleave to the roof of my mouth?" asked poor Steppie.

"I have provided against such an emergency," Arthura answered, gayly, and forthwith produced a little silver pouncet-box full of pastilles. "We will all take one just before our speeches begin. Then our tongues can not cleave, you know."

Steppie looked somewhat consoled.

"But there is another dreadful thing that might happen," she said. "What if my wings fall off just at a critical moment, or my wreath gets awry? People would laugh, and I should feel ready to sink into the earth."

"We will make wings and wreaths secure enough, never fear," was Arthura's reply, "although, when anything of the kind does occur, it is invariably looked upon as part of the performance. Nobody at play ever laughs out of season."

"That is certainly balm in Gilead," Steppie made answer.

And then the wonderful business of dressing began—a business the children would never forget as long as they lived. To discard the gear of actual real life, and put on the semblance of cherubs! To wear golden coronals, and garments soft as samite silvery white, to have azure-tipped wings, and badges embroidered with stars—above all, to carry little lutes, on which they had been taught to thrum a joyous note or two—how superlative, how unforgettable, was all this! Arthura went into the minutest particulars of each dress, giving Baby's hair a more cherubic curl, Walter's sky-blue mantle freer folds, Benjamine's coronal of roses a more careless look. As to Steppie, when all was finished she declared that she did not know herself.

Arthura's own appearance mattered little, she said, since

she was going to help Stephana generally, without taking any part in the pageant. In spite of remonstrance she put on no white gown, but something that suited her far better, that, indeed, transformed the mere handsome girl into a majestic woman. It was a black gown, yet a summer gown, being light as gossamer, whilst by way of adornment she wore magnificent roses of deepest, richest red. Of the same color was the fan in her hand and the silk cloak thrown over her shoulders.

“Dear Arthura,” said Steppie, embracing her when for a moment they found themselves alone, “you will to-day see Mr. Hermitage. Are you not very happy?”

“I should be, I suppose,” Arthura replied. “But remember we are only friends in the eyes of the world.”

“All will surely come right now?” asked Steppie, anxiously. “Mr. Hermitage is free. He will marry you soon.”

Arthura, by way of reply, merely kissed her step-mother, and gathering fan, gloves, and bouquet, prepared to go.

“We must think of other things to-day,” she said. “And now I had better make haste and see how Mr. Constantine looks as Time. The carriage will be sent back for you and the children, and I shall be at the entrance on the lookout.”

“If you could only convoy us! My heart fails me at the last.”

“Dear little mamma, scold that foolish little heart. I promised to Mr. Constantine to be at hand in case a finishing touch is necessary.”

“Could we not wait for you in the carriage at the door?”

“That would never do. The household is invited, and none are to see the masqueraders till their appearance in public.”

Then, waving her hand gayly to the little group on the stair-head, she entered Stephana’s carriage and drove off to Mr. Constantine’s. She sorely needed the half-hour’s solitude, for her brain was in a whirl. Valerian had come back again. Unless words stand for nothing, he loved her fondly as ever. Why, then, these misgivings, these vague forebodings? There had been no cessation of his letters, each and all breathing the same lover-like devotion. Again and again he had begged her to trust him and have patience with him. Obstacles stood in the way of his dearest wishes, he wrote. He was bound to consider Christina and Stephana; he was far yet from being in an independent position. A few weeks after his return, and the future would be made clear.

What troubled Arthura was the thought that whilst she loved Valerian still, she could no longer put absolute trust in him. She could but feel that he was concealing something from her now, and that it was rather Valerian's would-be than real self depicted in his letters. But love and hope are strong at twenty-four, and the thought of seeing Valerian again was at least mixed with pleasure as well as pain. It was a radiant face and a gay voice that greeted Mr. Constantine, elaborately dressed as Time. The old man was in his sprightliest mood.

"The drooping beard and staff, wings and patriarchal garments, are doubtless more becoming," he said, "but the skeleton and inverted scythe were more in my way. So you are to be only yourself. A discreet, a feminine choice! Now sit in judgment upon me. Am I veritably Time indeed, the hoary sage, the awful monitor? Do I look too old ever to have had a beginning, and not human enough ever to come to an end? No trace of flesh and blood, no sign of mortality?"

"You are admirable indeed, sir."

"Ah, my speech shall be more admirable still, for I would learn no part, I wanted to be wise for the last time on my own account. 'Twill be a brief utterance, but a pithy, I warrant you. Well, are we ready? I am as impatient as a child before the curtain is drawn up at a play."

CHAPTER XLI.

It was a world of roses, a world of sunshine, that awaited Stephana's guests that midsummer day, and much more. No sooner had they set foot within her precincts than a bewildering sense of novelty and splendor took possession of them. They were surely bidden to some royal pageant! This show could not be all for humble folks like themselves!

The avenue leading up to the somber old mansion glowed with crimson and gold banners, but it was the house itself that had been most transformed. Stephana had lived the life of Italy. She knew how to dress up a place in gala fashion, and instead of glittering effects and glaring contrasts had attained a subdued richness of color and wealth of ornamentation really poetic. Gorgeous Oriental carpets, and embroideries garlanded with fresh flowers hung from every window,

whilst the building itself seemed to rise from the midst of a vast flower bed, so profusely were stands of roses, lilies, and gladiolas placed round about.

If the house was all solidity and sumptuousness, the pavilion on the lawn was all lightness and airiness, a fairy palace raised for an hour, to-morrow to vanish without leaving a trace behind. This was also Stephana's handiwork, and she had chosen the pale glassy green hangings and silvery white decorations with a purpose. Nothing else could be in such keeping with the fresh foliage of summer. Her unsubstantial banquetting-hall looked, indeed, to belong to the world of blossoms and dew-drops and greenery around it; some flowery tenement sprung up in night for merry-making of fays and elves, and no more real than they. Most surprising and enchanting was this dome of pale sea-green, sheeny with sunshine, as it met the eyes of Stephana's guests—one joyous surprise out of the thousand in store for them.

Among the first to arrive was Christina, who knew that Stephana would expect one concession from her. She must see Valerian before the business of the day began, and get through that so dreaded meeting which was to mean reconciliation. To her great relief she found Arthura already come, and putting her hand within the girl's arm, determined not to let her go till the meeting with Valerian should be over. Not even Stephana should compel her to see him alone.

"My dear Arthura," she exclaimed, looking at her from head to foot admiringly, "I am very glad to see you. Now do tell me why did you get out of spirits when you were with me by the sea? I would have taken you to Italy; I would much rather have kept you. But moody people drive me mad."

"I am very sorry I was moody; but I wanted to see my own people oftener. That was one reason," Arthura said, with perfect candor.

"Well, you may live with me again some day—who knows?" Miss Hermitage replied, growing more and more nervous. She saw Valerian approaching. "Don't leave me, my dear," she added. "There is Valerian; he will like to see you again."

Arthura, knowing as much as she did of her companion's history, understood the reason of that uneasy voice and sudden grip of her arm; but she also wanted a defense against Valerian just then. Miss Hermitage little knew how fain she was to break from her hold and hide herself. Valerian

coming toward them, and every step that brought him nearer lessened her self-confidence and collectedness. To use Steppie's expression, it seemed indeed as if her tongue would cleave to the roof of her mouth. But no escape was possible. She *must* see him, yet how little could any bystander have divined what was going on in the minds of that superb girl and the spare, pale, bright-eyed old woman leaning on her arm! Arthura's rich carnation came and went, but blushes may mean coquetry and pleasure only. Outwardly calm and unmoved she awaited her lover, just as Christina, whilst inwardly burning with feverish dread, showed no perceptible emotion at her son's approach. Alike to the maiden and the mother this young man coming up to them with such airy port meant destiny, bale or blessing as long as life should last. To outsiders, it was a mere meeting of old friends. Bare-headed, and bowing with a charming smile, Valerian now stood before them. Christina, of course, had his first greeting. She moved a step forward, and for an instant disengaging her hand from Arthura's arm, held it forward, trying to smile, though ghastly pale. Words failed her utterly.

But Valerian's careless ease helped her. Without the slightest agitation, holding his hat in one hand, with the other he took her own, then very gracefully and gently he stooped and kissed her on either cheek. A perfect actor in a play could not have done it better. "I am very glad to see you back again, and well too—well as ever," was all he said.

Then came Arthura's turn. Here once more Valerian's presence of mind was proof against all assail. The lover-like look of intense admiration was followed by a commonplace smile, an ordinary greeting, and a hand-clasp. Was she well? he asked; would Mr. Constantine soon appear? and so on. Meantime he had given Christina his arm, and by that little action indicated clearly enough the line of conduct he had laid down for them both.

There was to be no painful explanation, no bitterness, no useless harrowing up of feelings. But their old relations were to be renewed. It was his part to take care of her and make things pleasant to her as of old, hers to be suave and confidential. The pair, whilst thus exchanging kind little nothings, could not in the least tell what was going on in the other's mind. For none can measure his fellow, and here mother and son, though their characters were much alike,

failed to guess even at the result brought about by this long and painful separation.

With Christina atonement for wrong-doing could only take one shape. There was a penalty to be paid, material, actual, of the earth earthy. Valerian had been wronged by her; he should now receive compensation. This was what she had to say to him, no more. The colossal fortune he had so skillfully helped her to enjoy should be his. The mother's duty should be acquitted by her so far. More she could not do, but this was surely all Valerian wanted of her; he was not sentimental any more than herself, and so long as they were pleasant and friendly toward each other, life might be smooth enough to both.

It seemed an easy thing to say, and here was the very opportunity. Arthura had turned to embrace Colette; no one was within hearing. Yet these little words, “Of course I will provide for you,” how hard they were to get out!—impossible, she said to herself at last. Whilst this momentary conflict was going on in her own mind, Valerian was occupied in a similar way. He also wanted to get out a few words, the only expression of remorse that occurred to him, but utterance did not come. To Valerian as to Christina one kind of compensation for wrong-doing presented itself only. The bitter pain he had given her and the remorseless way in which he had carried out his purpose did not trouble him; it was the consequences that he felt in duty bound to atone for, the careless life of distraction so suddenly put a stop to, the pleasant relations with himself disturbed, the worldly discomfort he had brought upon her. “You look well,” he began at last, and smilingly glanced at her bonnet of latest Paris fashion and dress of straw-colored satin fit for a queen. “Better than ever. This Italian journey has quite set you up, I hope.” Miss Hermitage gave an uneasy little laugh. “I am well enough,” she said. Then—it seemed to her a last chance—she got out the words that would have had a cruel sound in the ears of any but Valerian.

“I don't think I shall die yet; but when I do, what is mine will be yours, of course. I wanted to tell you so.”

Valerian did not look moved, although in reality he was more nervous than herself.

“I want you to live and be happy. Never mind me,” he stammered forth. “I am very sorry I disturbed your peace.”

“Let us go to Stephana,” Christina exclaimed, adding, in an undertone, piteously: “Say no more. We will never talk

of these things; we will forget that they have happened. But here comes Stephana, and looking quite a picture," she cried, with a sense of relief. It was once more Valerian's turn to collect himself, and use extreme presence of mind. There was Stephana, his affianced bride; there was Arthura, his love, his secretly betrothed, and not a word must be breathed by way of explanation or excuses to either as yet. The threads must be unraveled to-morrow. The palinode belonged to another day. Stephana was his benefactress, and he had betrayed her only that he might the better serve her interests; Arthura was his love, and would forgive the temporary lapse when she learned all.

So, when Stephana had embraced Christina affectionately, he moved forward, paying as it must seem to outsiders hardly more homage than was due from such a guest to such a hostess. The beautiful hand held out so cordially was just raised to his lips, that was all. "Welcome, most welcome home!" cried Stephana, smiling sweetly. "What welcome can be good enough"—she turned gayly toward Christina—"since you have brought Italian sunshine, and you"—here she looked affectionately at Valerian—"you have brought tidings of a promised land?"

"If such a reception did not satisfy us, we must both be hard to please indeed," answered Valerian, already feeling as if the most difficult part of the interview were got through, and beginning to breathe more freely. What if Stephana in her excess of gratitude had bent down her fair brow to be kissed! And Arthura standing by! Oh that this day with its pitfalls and toils ready to enmesh him on every side were well over! this one day only; the rest he was ready to encounter.

Stephana, all composure and calm joyousness, divined nothing of what was going on in his mind. With an unconscious look of confidence she now let one fair white hand rest for a moment on his arm. To Valerian that exquisite touch seemed like a fiery grip; he felt himself growing sick with fear and apprehension. But Stephana merely said, with a charming smile, "Ask Arthura to show you our beautiful preparations whilst I act the cicerone to our cousin."

She now gave her arm to Christina; Colette had vanished. Valerian found himself with Arthura alone. He had never seen her look so superbly, so distractingly handsome, and although the moment before out of countenance and out of heart, he regained self-possession now. Arthura at least knew

nothing of his imbroglia, and the mere fact of being able to whisper what he would in her ear seemed to make all things smooth. "May I come and see you to-morrow at your own home?"

"Will not Stephana want you?"

He turned round sharply and looked her full in the face, but nothing was there, he thought, to dismay him. The question was put out of girlish curiosity, perhaps not without a touch of natural jealousy, nothing more.

"And what if half a dozen to-morrows?"

The sweet sense of returning intimacy, and the conviction that nothing would be easier than to throw himself on Stephana's magnanimity, filled Valerian with growing self-confidence and ease. He was about to utter some lover-like rhapsody, when the blare of trumpets was heard at the gateway.

"That is the signal. Mr. Markham and his thousand have arrived," exclaimed Arthura. "We must not linger for a moment."

CHAPTER XLII.

TRUE enough it was the blind magician and the troop he had enchanted with his wand; every soul now so triumphantly marshaled under his banners having been brought to believe, Markham himself could hardly say how, "in the Golden Age which lies before us and not behind."

That inspiring sound of trumpets, usually associated in our minds with state pageantries that have no meaning, but echoed tumultuous joy, stirring a thousand hearts no more accustomed to excitement of such joyous kind than were the ears of these happy people to such transporting music. As one crowded car after another, each a veritable bower on wheels, came within the precincts, the band drawn up in readiness struck up a loud and triumphant strain. Then the garlanded and flower-bedecked carriages passed under a handsome triumphal archway showing in golden letters the motto, "God bless the people!" whilst the banners floating on every side bore other inscriptions as new and as appropriate. What a welcome for those who had never in all their lives been welcomed before, who see even the most solemn occurrences of life daily passing before their eyes without any accompaniment to stamp them on the imagination and the memory!

Alike birth, marriage, death, the greeting after long years, the supreme valediction, all come and go as mere breaking of daily bread and girding up of the loins for daily toil.

But to-day the order of things was reversed, and instead of princes, Stephana had bidden sovereignty of quite other kind with royal circumstance to enter her gates. Want and misery were made to smile, the brows of penury wreathed with flowers, and torpid pulses quickened for the first time with wine.

"Welcome! Welcome!"

This was the word that amid a thousand more of the same joyous significance met every eye but one of the happy hundreds soon peopling Stephana's grounds in every part. Markham was compelled to realize the bewildering scene by the light of inner vision only. Perhaps, indeed, he really saw more than any other present, every presumable feature in the scene being thus heightened by the imaginative faculty. The loud, merry strains of music, the animated voices, the ejaculations of wonder and admiration on every side must have affected him in this way as, led by a little child, he made the circuit of the place, "to see everything," she had said, heedlessly, although, indeed, her artless descriptions made him see them and far more.

"Now," she said, "a beautiful lady is coming toward us."

"You have already described so many beautiful ladies," Markham answered, smiling.

"Ah! this is the most beautiful of all," answered the child. "She has hair black as a raven's wing, and something that shines in it like a little star, and her dress is all white, with another star that twinkles on her bosom. I think it must be an angel."

"I think so too," Markham made laughing reply. "But I know that lady. Take me too her."

In another moment Stephana was by his side, and gayly dismissing the child with a kiss—she felt in the mood to embrace every one to-day—she took his arm.

"I must keep you a prisoner," she began to Markham. "You are master of the ceremonies, you know, and there is no little marshaling to be done. In the first place, how are we to get all these good people together for the masque? It will be given at once, and as soon as all are seated I have ordered cool drinks to be handed round."

"If sitting room is provided, have no fear," Markham answered, drawing from his pocket a tiny musical instrument.

"This is how I call my birds together," he said, straightway putting it to his lips.

The sound was not loud, but penetrating, and it reached the farthest recesses of the grounds. Like birds flocking at the cry of the caller came Stephana's guests, thronging round the pair, as motley a crowd as could well be conceived. Seven Dials can but trick itself out for a holiday in the best it has, and the bits of finery displayed here, not only by the woman-kind, but by the men, were outlandish enough. Here might be seen gowns of a fabric and pattern in high favor several generations ago, fashions of older date still, with flowers and faded ribbons that must have been worn by brides long since laid in their graves and forgotten. There was something extremely pathetic in the persistence with which anything that could be called personal adornment had been seized on and utilized. Stephana's guests, all, be it remembered, poorest of the poor, could not, when bidden to a feast, go a-shopping as the phrase runs. They could only furbish up such gala garments and gauds as they already possessed—a brooch here, precious heirloom, in moments of direst want pledged and redeemed a dozen times, a watch chain there, which had seen the same vicissitudes, with white frocks for the children, white still after years of lying by in London smoke, and ribbons, dyed and re-dyed at home, knotting every little girl's hair. If the garb of these poor London people was pathetic, telling a tale of privation and endurance that the more fortunate part of humankind can not realize, much less imagine, for themselves, much more so were the faces of the wearers. Sorrow and pain spare none, care is written at some time or other on every brow, but what painter can depict, what pen can describe, the corrugations of pinching poverty, the pallor of want, the indelible marks of perpetual struggle and grinding anxieties read here? To-day a smile played on every lip, and a look of almost childish beguilement was seen in every face, but the suffering of a lifetime can not be forgotten in an hour. Even Stephana could not work such a wonder. These emaciated countenances were to be freshened and these enfeebled frames invigorated in the happy life beyond sea, but not in a day, not in a year even, barely in a lifetime. It was a work for the all-healer Time. The crowd had now gathered round Stephana and her companion, listening expectantly for what was to come. As yet this wonderful day was an enigma and a mystery to them, but by little and little they felt that all would be made clear.

"My fellow-guests," began Markham, feeling that a little pleasant raillery and banter would be well-timed, "we all know that when we are bidden to a feast something is expected of us. People do not give us champagne and creams for nothing. Well, we have come here, first to be made wise, and next to be made merry, and any one who can help us in either matter is called upon to do so. Now our first business being to be made wise, we have all straightway to take our places demurely in yonder amphitheater, and listen without uttering a syllable to what we shall hear.

"When the beautiful performance is over, any one who will stand up and say a few words about it and try to explain it to his neighbors will be listened to attentively. Then— But there are so many features in the programme that I can not enumerate them all. Enough to say that the most important after the fairy spectacle we are now going to witness is the banquet. Our hostess will preside, and will say a few words to you at the close. Away, then; let us hie to our places."

In an incredibly short space of time the vast pleasure-ground was cleared of the last straggler, and like birds congregated together before the autumnal flight southward Stephana's happy people in one compact crowd awaited the coming spectacle. There there sat smiling and wondering, unaware of the fact that they themselves made a spectacle of deepest interest to some of the by-standers. For this artless bewilderment, this intense, almost childish satisfaction at the prospect of amusement, painted on every face, was moving to behold. The very word amusement conveyed as yet but a dim and indistinct meaning to most of them. They felt much as a handful of their numbers had done when sent the year before on an excursion to the sea-side. The sea, the sea, what could it be like? To-day the feeling uppermost in every mind was of curiosity. A fairy masque, an allegory with music and singing, what was that? Perplexed and delighted, all of them for the nonce turned into five-year-old children, they sat with eyes fixed on the elegant stage before them, at present all silence and emptiness, soon to be turned into a scene of enchantment.

The little ones, found room for on the knees of their elders, were not more flushed with eagerness than they, as the blissful moment drew near. Even sherbert and strawberries lost their charm, and by-and by impatience began to be manifested in a few timid taps of walking-sticks and umbrellas.

“*Won't* they ever come?” asked one child on the verge of bursting into tears.

“What *can* they be about?” said another.

Impatience, indeed, had reached the highest pitch, when at last the signal was given, the band played a short introductory movement, and the beautiful show began.

Stephana had purposely withheld anything in the shape of a programme or elucidation. The best part of a poem or of any imaginative work, she said, is that part we all find out for ourselves, and if our allegory is meaningless without such aid, no amount of explanation can make it clear.

And now the masquerade began.

CHAPTER XLIII.

It was not at all likely that Stephana's audience should be alive to the elaborate structure of her allegory and the thought upon thought involved in the leading idea. What they saw and realized as one gorgeous procession after another with music and banners now passed before the proscenium and took its station on the stage was this :

First, heralded by joyous trumpeting, came an emblematic personage representing Britannia, superb matron and sea-queen, drawn in a car, all the insignia of empire there, and the accessories familiar to us all given on an imposing scale. As she was slowly and majestically wheeled to her station on the right hand of the stage a chorus of little boys dressed as Jack Tars sang a patriotic sea-song, and a gigantic union-jack was sent flying as if by magic high above the heads of the car.

The band now struck up “Hail, Columbia!” Next came Columbia. She, as beloved imperial daughter of an imperial mother, was fair and stately to see. Her brows showed a circlet set with thirteen stars, emblematic of the glorious Thirteen, whilst the shield she bore was richly emblazoned with the Indian's head and the figure of Liberty. The famous motto *E Pluribus Unum* was given in letters of gold.

Following Columbia came a gay and motley procession : little black boys and girls in bright dresses, red Indians in their war gear, and many other impersonations. They bore the national banner, and as they crossed the stage sang lustily in chorus :

"'Tis the star-spangled banner, oh, long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!"

Rich and suggestive was the appearance of the stage now, the right side being occupied with the allegorical pageant of Britannia, the left with that of Columbia; and it seemed to the enraptured audience—although as yet not a word had been spoken by either of those majestic personages—that the spectacle was complete. Was it not enough to behold such an impersonation of Britannia, the foster-mother of every man, woman, and child present, in the spirit if not in the letter, the arbitress of every fate, the mistress of every destiny, the love of all? Fitting, too, was it that the no less majestic daughter should be there too—that blooming Columbia, emblematic of the new empire and the new destiny awaiting generations unborn beyond seas.

The pageant, however, was but half over, and scarcely was the hubbub of admiration and bewilderment hushed when a third procession was ushered in to the sound of slow and solemn music.

No part of the performance surpassed the representation of the old Father Time. There was Mr. Constantine, bald as an egg, a halo round about his head, a long white beard drooping on his breast, on one shoulder the emblematic scythe, whilst from both drooped wings. Very venerable and picturesque he looked, and very impressive the utterances that now dropped from his lips.

"Hail, sweet ladies and honest gentlemen all!" he said, and he leaned on his staff in the middle of the stage, and looked up with a keen, searching smile. "Ah! when Time was young 'twas but a few who got these gentle names, and now every mother's son and daughter of you claims 'em, and rightly, too. Let us be jealous of 'em, for they mean nothing or what should belong to all—independence, a high mind, a spirit to protect the weak. Every Eve shall be a lady, every Adam a gentleman, ere old Time's beard is half a yard longer. Harken, dear babes and bantlings, 'tis old Father Time himself speaking; ye won't hear him any more! Give me, then, two ears and an understanding, and ye'll go forth the wiser. My little babes and unbreeched urchins, my pretty sucklings and stammerers, for is not the oldest white-headed grandsire among you as a freshly weaned puppet to Father Time, who never had a beginning and will never have any end at all? Well," here he struck his staff on the

ground, “one thing let me hammer into your understandings. These modern times have scotched a serpent, of most venomous bite too. Its name is Privilege. Privilege is under the heel of honest men. The future of the world shall belong to ALL! No more prerogative except of inner manfulness and sterling worth, no more rank but of merit and virtue! So look well before and after. Let the woman’s standard be the man’s also. Keep your minds pure, your bodies chaste. Be pitiful to the beast. Let each individual’s soul be as the just ruler of a fair kingdom. For heed the admonitions of Father Time! Man is born no slave to evil, but *free to choose the good!* Hail, Columbia! worthier daughter of a worthy mother. Father Time turns to thee with the rapture of a young lover a-wooing. No stars in the heaven fairer than the thirteen that glitter on thy brow, since they symbolize the right of mankind over its own destiny, and the right of one the right of all! Take these children. School them to independence and virtue. Whip the foolish and the lazy. Place a fool’s cap on the dunce. Spare not the birch. But, dear goddess and school-mistress of the whole wide world, let none shame thee and their country—Father Time’s all-hail, amen, and final God bless you!”

The most poetic and enchanting part of the performance was Steppie Sadgrove’s impersonation of Hope. For weeks, nay, months past, she had conjured up before her mind’s eye this much dreaded yet much-coveted scene, when sadness should drop from her as by magic, and for once, if for once only, she should be transformed into Hope’s living embodiment. Nothing but a feeling of exhilaration was needed to work the necessary outward change. Steppie’s gentle features, almost infantine still in their tenderness of outline and delicacy, had little look of care or maturity about them; a rosy smile, adimpling of the cheek, a soft brightness of the eyes, and the wonderful transformation was complete.

As Steppie now appeared, surrounded by little Loves, rosy, cherubic, like herself, intoxicated with joy, she seemed to tread on air, enamored for the moment of rapture and bliss. One idea and one only was present to her mind, one phrase echoed and re-echoed to her memory:

“All Hope, enchanted, smiled, and waved her golden hair.”

A lovely line it is, and lovely it made Steppie look, as it took almost demoniac possession of her now. That fair yel-

low hair of hers was tossed as ecstatically as the tresses of a bacchante, her blue eyes shone with mild luster, her lips were parted in a rosy smile. She seemed to herself to be smiling on all the world, to have come down from some upper region on purpose to smile, and for one brief moment it did seem to her as if she should go on smiling to the end of her life. Surely no transitory joyance, no hallucinatory exuberance was this, but a passage from one condition of being to another, a kind of resurrection to a new, more sunny life.

Steppie, looking round her, and seeing all these sallow, care-worn faces lighted up by her own smiles, catching the reflex of her own matchless mood, for a moment surpassed herself. She was drunken, but not with wine; her heart was made glad by a stimulant of less gross kind as she now smiled away the sadness of her own and a thousand hearts. "Oh!" she whispered to Arthura, a little later, when, all excitement over, she wiped away the joyful tears from her flushed cheeks—"oh! I should be so happy if I were not so miserable!"

It were hard to say what part of the spoken programme delighted the audience most—Britannia's farewell charge to her children and the step-mother to whose care she now consigned them; Columbia's reply, worded in the same magnanimous spirit; the weighty monitions of Time; or, lastly, the sweet, joyful utterances of Hope.

They understood every word—so, at least, they thought—as one by one the speakers advanced to the front of the stage and spoke in stately monologue—Britannia's parting admonition, Columbia's welcome, Time's oracular utterance, Hope's artless oratory. What else could all these mean but that they were to grow better, wiser, and happier in the New World and the new life awaiting them? One long word sounded very much like another in their unaccustomed ears, but the mere sound was inspiring and oracular. Yes, scripture itself was no clearer. They were going to a better land, and first on this side of the grave, not the other. A Providence, after all, had been watching over them, and the good things of life were not henceforth to be the exclusive portion of the rich—that is to say, the envied.

With the same smiles of childish wondering enjoyment they now dispersed to enjoy the flowers and shrubberies till the banquet should take place. This pleasant interlude, no less grateful to hosts than guests, lasted upward of an hour without anything that could be called an incident. The

children fed Stephana's swans on their miniature lake, the young girls studied the beautiful dresses of the ladies, the old folks sunned themselves, the men curiously inspected the mechanical arrangements of the theater and pavilion. All were silent, demure, and happy.

Of the banquet no need to say a word. There was nothing enigmatic or oracular here, only plain, unmistakable enjoyment and instruction of a solid kind. Every one of the unaccustomed cates before them conveyed not only a pleasure but a lesson. The best possible lesson in cookery, indeed, is a bidding to a well-cooked dinner, and nothing we can preach about moderation and good manners so effective as example.

Herein was matter for thought for the hundreds of guests whose meals had been all their lives taken anyhow—sometimes not taken at all, and under the best of circumstances so poor and scanty as to afford hardly a gratification.

The banquet drawn to a close, and some toasts drunk with those light sweet Southern wines which just exhilarate and nothing more, it was Stephana's turn to say a few words.

Lovely indeed she looked as she stood up to perform this duty, her dress pure white, diamonds flashing in her dark hair and on her bosom; just behind her, the pair forming a striking contrast, red rose and white, Arthura in her sumptuous dress, with its rich crimson roses, warm carnation in her cheeks and on her lips, while Stephana's pearly complexion was paler than ever.

It was a simple speech enough that Stephana made, but it went straight as an arrow to every heart. She said exactly what a kind, wise friend should say under such circumstances—nothing approaching the sentimental—all crystal clear, forcible, to the purpose.

As she came to an end she glanced at Valerian and paused. Then, blushing rosy-red, she added, her voice clear as a bell, reaching every ear: "I have a last word to say, and I am sure it will please you all to hear it. I have already mentioned one true friend of mine and yours;" here she inclined her head toward Markham, sitting near. "I must not leave off without speaking of another, since to him both you and I are equally indebted. You must know whom I mean: this kind and indefatigable friend, who went as a pioneer into the New World to select fair lands for you, who will ere long—that I dare undertake to promise—visit you, to see how all is prospering; nor will he come alone. We

shall have your hearty prayers and wishes meanwhile, I know, for I may say to such good friends and well-wishers this trusty keeper of mine is to be something more. When I visit you in your new, happy world it will be as his wife."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE hour of separation had come, and yet Stephana's visitors lingered, as if unwilling to break the spell that bound them to her presence. All knew that there was now nothing to stay for. The last carmine streak had vanished from the western sky, the dews were falling, the signal for departure long ago given; but nobody stirred an inch in the direction of the gateway. It was a sweet place of peace and thanksgiving just now, this old-fashioned lawn, and as Stephana contemplated it her heart exulted within her. It seemed as if her dearest wishes were realized at last, and as if life had no more to give. Such moments of ecstasy happen to most of us once in a lifetime. Not the mere cup full to the brim of joy is raised to our lips, but a drop of elixir worth many brimming cups. First and foremost came the joyful conviction of having proved a kind of Providence to a thousand human lives. Thorns might spoil some of their roses; in these new waters 'twould not be all smooth sailing; but she had put each man, woman and child in a fair way of holding up the head, showing, indeed, the true manly, true womanly, enriching them mentally and bodily so far that they need envy none. Next to this satisfaction came the feeling that two lives at least, and these two knit to her by ties of kindred, were made better, if not consciously happier, by her means. Christina lived now in the light of truth, and need no longer dread imminent retribution and remorse. Such atonement as it was in her power to make she had promised, and whether or no she thought herself happier, she was so past question. The weight of secret wrong-doing was lifted from her conscience. She could look her fellows in the face.

Over Valerian, Stephana rejoiced most of all. She said to herself now that Valerian's soul was hers indeed, and that not only had she awakened a conscience in this somewhat shallow nature, she had also touched his heart. Long ago he loved her, but he was now in sympathy with her, a result she had set more store by. Passionless herself, she had

never yet been moved by any man's passion. Valerian's unswerving devotion, however, and uncompromising acquiescence in her wishes did now in reality awaken a warmer feeling than mere cousinly affection. She was intensely grateful to him for all that he had done for her, and drawn to him by all the sacrifices he had made on her behalf. All that he had to give was hers: time, inclination, talents of no mean order. Surely, surely she should be satisfied, and not exact loftiness of soul accorded only to the few!

It seemed to Stephana just then that it was unreasonable to do less than try to love this poor Valerian a little in return for loving her so much. And his life hitherto had been a series of disappointments and mortifications. She must endeavor to be a Providence to him also, for who needed one more?

Of Markham, Stephana thought tenderly and serenely. Here all was security and assurance. Markham's magnanimous soul could well be left to take care of itself; and if she could not requite a no less magnanimous devotion, she could comfort herself with the thought that at least he had inner consolations.

If, then, consummate happiness is any mortal's portion for a brief spell, Stephana tasted it at that moment. As her eyes rested on the quiet yet animated scene before her they filled with blissful tears. This twilight calm, the fair day shutting like a flower, the fairer dawn to come, all these awakened within her breast a sense of rapturous contentment, the deeper because it was impersonal.

While she lingered thus in a little summer-house on the highest ground of her domain, for a moment isolating herself from the scattered groups below, soft strains of music caught her ear. It was the music of human voices only, and the strains, low almost to indistinctness at first, soon swelled into a rich volume of sound that reached from one end of the garden to the other.

The song that had been begun on the spur of the moment by one of the company present is familiar to most, and if anticipatory had nevertheless a peculiar appropriateness. If strange in the ears of some of these London-bred children, the melody was not difficult to catch, and prompters were at hand:

"Shades of evening, close not o'er us,
 Leave our lonely bark awhile;
 Morn, alas! will not restore us
 Yonder dim and distant isle."

So ere long this sweet and simple song—a song no more, but one vast harmony of more than a thousand voices—filled the place and caught the attention of careless passers-by in the streets without.

At first pensive and tender, soon rising to deep, passionate strength, the artless melody, with its moving words, might well bring tears to eyes unaccustomed to weep at mere words. Not one, however, of Stephana's guests was in tearful mood just then as they gave vent to their feelings in words :

“ What would I not give to wander
Where my old companions dwell,
Absence makes the heart grow fonder.
Isle of beauty, fare thee well ! ”

There was just a touch of sentiment, but hardly sorrow, in the minds of the emigrants as they now filed past her in little bands, directing their steps toward the garden gate, their minds being at last made up that they *must* go. On the longest day of the year who can say when night begins? And in the liquid pearliness of this exquisite twilight every feature of the picture was clear as in broad day.

There was Valerian, having Christina on his arm, whilst they halted listening to the song, Valerian joining in it. Not far off was Markham, led by a little girl, yet all the time leading the whole. And there was Mr. Constantine, his last word of wisdom spoken, yet so far overcoming his weariness as to wait for departure. And Steppie was there, a child among the children, a toddling thing held by each hand—all singing as if their very lives depended on it.

But where was Arthura?

The thought had hardly crossed Stephana's mind when she heard her name called, and, looking up, saw her standing near. What a contrast the two presented! Stephana radiant, yet calm as this silvery twilight; Arthura atremble and aglow with passion, her cheeks red as the roses in her hair, her eyes bright as the jewel glittering in Stephana's.

Had not Stephana been intensely absorbed by her own tranquillizing thoughts she must have noticed the extraordinary excitement, almost wildness of her companion, reined in for the moment, but evident nevertheless. Stephana was too happy to be alive to anything going on around her just then, and out of the fullness of joy could not resist taking the girl's hand, even kissing her, as a sister might have done in some ineffable moment that belonged to both.

"Oh!" she cried, "look at these happy people. Not one of all these hundreds of hearts but is mine! How rich, how more than blessed, am I to have such love, such benedictions!"

Arthura stood for a moment in painfulest conflict. The word was on her lips which would for once and for all shake these joyous confidences and dispel these blissful illusions. How could she say it? How could she hold her peace? It seemed to her as she paused thus, a thing of evil passions hateful to herself, love like hate within her bosom, that it was a bounden duty to turn and flee. What business had she among Stephana's hopes, beautiful as these large midsummer flowers shining out of the pearly light? Better, far better, to bury her own miserable passions, and let those who would delude themselves with dreams of love and loyal affection.

To Arthura's warm, robust nature there was sacredness as well as mystery about this pale, sweet Stephana; it seemed to her as if, like the mystic lady of the poem, "she had no companion of mortal race"; and now, with this burning hatred at her heart, and almost a craving for common vengeance, she still hesitated to speak out.

Had no Stephana been by and deadly weapons at hand, she felt she could have rushed forward to stab her lover's, false lover's, heart as he stood within ear-shot, outwardly calm and smiling, inwardly, it must be, at warfare with himself. The soothing influence of Stephana's presence, the cool evening hour, the mixed pathos and solemnity of these parting strains, for a while checked Arthura's vindictive mood.

But at last grief and indignation would have their way. Stephana must know all. She could not keep silence a moment longer.

"Stephana!" she cried, breaking from that sisterly hold, "all is not as you think. If there is wizardry in your eyes, use it now. Discover the fallen angel, the one black heart among all these, and smite him to the ground with scorn where he stands!"

Stephana started and looked at Arthura doubtingly, wondering if indeed she were smit with sudden craziness. But the truth of the girl's wild words was written in her face and in one other that shrank their gaze now. Arthura's words he had hardly caught, but the meaning of this strange scene flashed across Valerian's mind then. Arthura's look of passion, Stephana's sad astoundment, the silence, the shock, were not to be misinterpreted. In a moment his position be-

came clear to him. There was no place for a Valerian beside these true-hearted women. He had wronged both past forgiveness. Except for his mother, he was alone. She at least could understand the weakness and crookedness that had let him into this pitfall. She at least could never reproach him with cowardice and double-dealing. She was disarmed. They were quits. Valerian stirred not. His white face told no tale in that dim light; but had Stephana and Arthura been able to read it, some compassion might have been awakened on his behalf. For the first time in his life he was now brought face to face with himself—with meanness, with falseness, with worldliness. Yet in spite of all these, a higher aspiration, an instinct of better things, was his. He needed something better than the old life begun over again with Christina, deprived of all that had before made it bearable—Stephana's friendship, Arthura's love!

Valerian stirred not, although there seemed poltroonery in inaction. Once he moved forward, as if impelled to say a word on his own behalf, but the faces of the pair were averted. They would perhaps turn from him as from a serpent, perhaps never speak to him again!

"Come," he said to his companion, "we are not wanted here any longer. Let us go home."

"Without a word of good-by to Stephana," asked Christina, in a tone of surprise.

"At least we are not going to America," he said, as he made this retort feeling drearily and bitterly how much wider and deeper the gulf between him and these two noble women than the broad Atlantic. Then he hurried her away, passing unobserved through the crowd of miscellaneous guests to the carriage that awaited them at the gateway.

So whilst Markham marshaled his little bands toward their gayly decorated cars, the burden of their song still kept up by those who remained in the rear, Stephana and Arthura were left more and more to themselves. And soon in that heavenly summer twilight, fragrant with lilies and roses, pale, silvery stars gleaming out of the pearly heavens, they found themselves alone.

The singing had now died away altogether, and the last stragglers had gone, Stephana's beautiful rose garden abandoned to its mistress.

With a sudden impulse, half of craving for sympathy, half of deep womanly compassion, Stephana now caught the weeping girl to her bosom, and the pair were fast locked in each

other's arms. To both it was a moment of supreme valediction. One wept pure womanly tears, as if her heart were breaking over a lost love, the other as an angel over a perjured soul she had tried to redeem!

CHAPTER XLV.

AT the eleventh hour Markham had yielded to Stephana's request that he should accompany her little colony to their new world. It seemed to him a small concession to make after so many, and as much of his heart as was not in Stephana's self was in her work. He went off cheerfully, therefore, feeling, perhaps, a secret sense of relief at the notion of being out of England for the next few months.

Nothing definite had been said on the subject in his hearing, but he could not doubt that on his return he should find Stephana wedded to Valerian. The thought was unendurable. The vessel had sailed, then, and Markham with it. So at least Stephana believed. She had seen him indeed embark in the docks, she had received a penciled farewell from the Nore; she imagined him now in mid-ocean, surrounded by the dear people he so loved to entertain, telling stories interminable, as a minstrel of old.

What was her amazement, a few days after the hoisting of the blue-peter, to hear Markham's voice in the corridor.

It was late in the evening, and she sat alone in her favorite room, an upper chamber, from which she could not only hear the turmoil of the great world of London, but could see as if from a mountain top the ceaseless ebb and flow of the busy crowds below. Generous spirits should ever live on airy heights, and thus take in larger vistas of the human bee-hive seen at work, and of which they form a section.

Stephana, catching on a sudden the voice of her blind friend, rose joyfully and went out to greet him. Never in all her life had she felt in such need of him as now. She almost forgot the inexplicable nature of his appearance in her pleasure.

"You have come back?—you have come back to me?" she cried, as she led him into the room.

"Could I stay away?" he asked. "You remember my promise made nearly two years ago? You have but summoned me, and I obey the summons."

"I did not write. There was no means of communicating with you," she answered, amazed. Then, on a sudden recollecting what had transpired on another parting in this very house and in this very room just seventeen months ago, she cried, joyfully, "I remember—I understand. Yes," she answered, taking one of his hands, and letting him feel the tears he could not see, "I have wanted you, my friend. I am very desolate."

"There was more than a vague feeling of loneliness. There was an invocation, a summons. But let me tell you everything, and you shall then say whether or no I have been dreaming," he said, stirred with deep, unutterable contentment. "Listen, then, to my story. We were at anchor off Plymouth two nights ago, about this very time, and in another hour or two the pilot-boat was to return to shore with letters, and we were to be fairly under sail. I sat alone, my head bowed on my breast, lost in thought, while the rest amused themselves with watching the lights and general bustle of the town. As I sat thus the confusion of voices around me seemed to die away on my ears, and in the silence and stillness—imaginary, of course, for the hubbub of voices and commotion was indescribable, only in my reverie I heard it not—all was hushed about me, then, for a little space, and on a sudden—it was as if the voice was close by—I was called by name, and the voice I heard was yours."

He raised his head, with a look of intense, passionate joy, as if light *must* break upon the darkness for an instant, and for once—for once only—the face of his beloved would be revealed to him.

"Oh!" he cried, "I seemed to see you then as I seem to see you now. There were tears on your cheek, as there are at this moment, and your voice was one not of farewell, but of greeting—of earnest entreaty and appeal. Once, twice, thrice I heard the words, 'Markham, Markham, will you, too, abandon me?' they said. Yes, you can not deny it. They were thine. The moment so vehemently desired, so sweet to think on, that I said it should more than console me for my misfortune, had come. In spirit thou hadst claimed me."

Stephana was silent; a nobler emotion than pride checked her utterance. All that sympathy and compassion had said so long on Markham's behalf a deeper feeling was saying now; yet she hesitated. Other promptings made themselves heard also.

Even in her forlornness and disenchantment she did not

feel wholly to belong to herself, much less to Markham. Valerian's lapse seemed a warning that all wedded to the general weal should stand alone. The work she had set herself to do needed less love than a steady purpose to aid her own uncompromising self-abnegation, to keep her company. "Oh!" she said, imploringly, leaning her own soul on his, trying to make him understand these inner conflicts, "what does the rest matter? You and I surely should not think of ourselves."

"At least, then, tell me that I was not dreaming. Two nights ago, at this very hour, you did indeed in spirit call upon my friendship, my love?"

Ah me for Markham that he could not see that fine blush mantling her pale cheeks! The sigh he did hear, and the just perceptible tremor in her voice told him more.

"Your summons must mean all or nothing," he went on. "You have discovered Valerian's inadequacy. All is over between you and your cousin?"

Stephana was silent.

"I felt all along that it must be so," Markham added. "Heaven forbid that I should judge another! In one point only I hold myself worthier of you than poor Valerian. My soul lies open to your own as a book. Read it by the light of a midsummer-day. No words there my own love must not see."

"You are my best, dearest friend," Stephana murmured. "Is not that enough? When the best thoughts of two beings are in perfect unison there is a marriage of souls."

"But a marriage of souls is no bond," Markham answered, almost bitterly. "Your home may not be mine. Any accident may divide us to-morrow. I measure the height and depth and length and breadth of the sacrifice I ask at your hands," went on the blind lover. "You shall not make it in vain. You will give heavenly consolation to a darkened life. Your best requital will be the joy of another."

"If I yield I should belong to you—to the calls of duty no longer," Stephana urged.

"May not love sometimes be highest duty? And think not you can live alone. That cry of desolation I heard two days ago still rings in my ears. Stephana, beloved, you need me even as I need you."

He stretched out his hands to find her own in the night perpetually about him, and Stephana let him clasp them. He had come to her in a time of such desolation that she could

not choose but cling to him. And for the first time, perhaps, she realized to the full what the loneliness of his own life must be—compelled even to trust himself to others in the least little thing, to be led hither and thither as a child, the beauty of the human face, the miracles of art, the joyous, shifting revelry of the visible world hid from his gaze forever and forever and forever. Was she not bound to become as the light of the eyes to the much-tried, heavenly, patient soul?—whilst striving to do good to many lives, to be a guardian angel to this one? Lastly, Stephana could but feel that Markham was the only being in the world who had ever really understood her. The subtle spiritual gifts she felt conscious of were matched here. All the influence she could exercise over her fellows Markham could wield too, but by different means. That voice of his had power to fascinate and to soothe, even as her own eyes were said to do; and by some strange faculty, akin to those with which she was endowed, he could read her thoughts and anticipate her most secret wishes. Oh! was there not something better, higher, deeper even than love here—some voice of destiny, which is the voice of God?

And in that moment of uncertain, joyous hesitancy Stephana's thoughts went farther still, for let it not be supposed that the act of turning a thousand poor London artisans into landed proprietors seemed to her more than a stepping-stone to better things. This was a mere piece of beneficence, the gratification of a magnanimous whim. Her notion of doing good had a deeper root, and was based upon keener insight into the truth of things, than hand-to-mouth philanthropy. And to attain her purpose could she have a better helper than Markham, the man of stainless soul, of more than womanly tenderness, of a courage that dreaded no ridicule, no rebuff? Yes; they were surely brought together for good. Valerian! Valerian! Was it of such poor stuff the world's reformers are made? And Stephana saw all things clearly now—the mysterious call to England, its reference to Valerian, the meaning of the heraldic emblazonry, the blank scroll. Her mission had been to reconstitute Valerian in his right; to unburden Christina's bosom of secret wrong; to reconcile mother and son; and last, yet first, to awaken in Valerian—the heir of the Gossip-Hermitage family—a conscience for the adequate disposal of his fortune. All this was done. Was she not free to think of herself? Was not her deep, unconfessed love for Markham a call that should be followed also?

"You have said it," she said. "I do need you—not only now, but always."

It was surely no unmanliness that brought the happy tears to Markham's withered eyes then. His hitherto irremediable ill seemed healed. He needed the light no longer. Enough of brightness, sweetness, and beauty was now to be his portion. For a moment he took her, lover-like, in his arms and pressed his lips to her forehead. "Kind God in heaven!" he whispered, "what have I done to be made so happy?"

"Nay," Stephana retorted, as she sat down by his side; "say, rather, what shall I do in return for being made so happy?—if, indeed, the service to which you are binding yourself can be called happiness at all."

Markham smiled on the sweet task-mistress he could not see, and would fain have prolonged this lover-like confabulation—would have tried to win yet another promise ere he went.

But in love as in friendship Stephana swayed him to her will. Love is made up half of mystery, half of expectation, and she new well enough, that as lovers they should never be happier in each other than now. Seven years, and seven years more, he must serve his apprenticeship to love, if to her it should seem good.

CHAPTER XLVI.

IF Stephana had vanquished herself, another victory yet remained to be won harder still. The first disillusion of her life had made her afraid of love, and at the root of her wavering toward Markham from the first was this feeling of distrust. His love for her was of long ago; but although strangely attracted to him, not only by the tenderness of his nature—have not all rare men the tenderness of a woman?—but by his misfortune, she had even repelled it, fearing lest her own, if once awakened, might suffer disillusion. A woman can understand but one man in the world—her lover; and Stephana feared that even Markham's character might not bear that fearful scrutiny, that terrible ordeal, the life of two that becomes the life of one. Now she doubted no longer. Markham's existence was to be consoled by the sweetness of home, domesticity, nearness; and in return he was to be her helper, adviser, fellow-worker. At least, if she

gave much, she should receive more in return. But that other reconciliation on which her mind was bent—how should she make peace between Arthura and Valerian? The palinode was to be spoken, the kiss of peace accorded. But by what means was a real reconciliation to be brought about? A few days afterward Valerian came to see her. He had nerved himself up to this interview, which was to be the prelude of one with Arthura. He *must* see her, must pour out his soul to her, and only Stephana could help him.

"Let us be friends, my cousin," were Stephana's first calm re-assuring words. "And let us both forget and forgive. There can not be another syllable to say."

She held out her hand, but Valerian did not raise it to his lips. He sat down opposite to her, haggard, ill at ease, remorseful. "Perhaps you are right," he replied. "Little use to talk of what is done, and can never be undone. Thank God, we are cousins," he added, with a grim smile. "You are bound to exercise Christian charity toward me, if for no other reason, because I am of your own blood."

Stephana smiled. How Valerian's nature showed itself in every deed and word!

"To my thinking that were a reason for hard judgment—at any rate, implacable justice," she made reply. "But what conceivable right has any human being to judge another, unless when brought face to face as criminal and judge?"

"You will not turn your back upon me, then?" Valerian asked, humbly. "You will not wholly give me up?"

"Are you not my kinsman?" said Stephana, again smiling. "Relatives are bound to each other for weal or woe." Her cheerfulness somewhat took Valerian aback.

"Have I not received you to-day friendlily as of old?"

Valerian was dumb.

"We have turned a new page. Let neither of us ever so much as once glance backward," Stephana said. "What you have to do now is to make peace with Arthura and regain her confidence."

"Will you help me?" Valerian asked, fully understanding his position with regard to Stephana. They were cousins. They would never be anything more.

"Because, if you will," he said, eagerly, "I shall take it as a sign that you forgive me and trust me still."

Stephana perused him narrowly.

"Of course I will," she said at last, "and of course you

will prove worthy of trust, where *Arthura* is concerned,” she added, quickly; “for, dear *Valerian*, let us now by common consent bury this ignoble little past and think of what is coming. This very day I will go and see *Arthura*.”

Then they talked of many things—of *Christina*, of her plans, of her gratification at having seen *Arthura* again. *Stephana* had to tell *Valerian* to go, so relieved was he to be able at last to talk to her with perfect openness. And when he did go, it was with a much lighter heart than he had come. *Stephana*’s lofty-minded pardon arose, doubtless, from entire indifference to himself. That was humiliating. But it smoothed the way. It made welcome possibilities seem near.

That same day *Stephana* drove to *Russell Square*, about the time she felt sure of finding *Arthura*. The pair had not met since the passionate confidences of the festive evening. It often happens that the complete outpouring of heart and heart is followed by a feeling of shyness. As far as *Valerian* was concerned, neither *Arthura* nor *Stephana* could reveal anything more; and perhaps both felt a little sorry and a little womanly shame at having already said so much. *Arthura*’s proud secret was out. She did, indeed—did once—love this shallow, plausible, vacillating *Valerian* with all her heart; and *Stephana*, in her indignation, had shown with what hopeful affection and interest she had for a short space clung to him, and with what whole-heartedness she had believed in him.

When they met to-day, therefore, it was with a shrinking on both sides, and, at least on *Arthura*’s, a disinclination to personal talk. Hardly were the first greetings over before *Stephana* declared her errand. Sitting close to *Arthura*, holding the girl’s hands in hers, and fixing on her those beautiful dark-brown eyes, that seemed to soothe even when they inspired a feeling almost akin to awe, she said, smiling quietly, “You will never, never guess what I have come to say to you.”

Arthura lifted one of *Stephana*’s hands to her cheek and kissed it passionately. The only strong, beautiful, righteous thing in the world just then, the girl thought, was this fair, mystic creature, whose business seemed the consolation of others.

“I have come to say that you must marry *Valerian*,” *Stephana* added, still in the quietest voice, while she watched her companion.

“Ask me rather to marry the coward that has run away

from battle! But not Valerian. And he would not dare to do it. He would fear me."

As Arthura uttered these words, with red cheeks and unusually bright eyes, it did seem indeed as if anyone who had wronged her might tremble with fear then. Just such passion and outraged feeling as hers turn trembling, faint-hearted maidens into vengeance-dealing Diræ. Her tall, slight figure was drawn up, and her young face dark with angry passion.

"If I am wicked, I will do other penance for it," she cried, weeping bitterly. "And I will follow your behest, Stephana, in all else. There is an evil spirit in me now. I almost feel as if it would be sweet to me to make Valerian suffer. Were he drowning, I should, perhaps, withhold the rope that might save his life. But I will do him no harm, if you keep him out of my sight; only I must hate him in peace for a little while."

Stephana waited till the passion should be over, without a word. Arthura went on, weeping: "I did shameful things for his sake. I lied—not with my tongue, but with my acts—out of love for him. How kind Miss Hermitage was to me, to us both! And all the time we were deceiving her. You, too, you were kinder than the angels, and he let me, he made me, act lies to you. Oh, Stephana! never talk to me of marriage at all. There may be other Valerians in the world. I can be happy as I am."

She threw herself on her knees by Stephana's side, still shaken with passion. "I will ever love you as if you were something more than an ordinary mortal," she said, laying her head on Stephana's bosom. While she lay thus Stephana leaned over her tenderly, as a mother tending a feverish child, lifting the hair from her hot brow, fanning the hot cheeks. But it was the quiet magic of her eyes that did at last, and by little and little, calm the girl's wild mood. After a time the passion spent itself, and she lay in her friend's arms, pale and listless, an image of sorrow, but of vindictiveness no longer.

"I am very wicked. You must drive the demon out of me," she said, looking up into her companion's face, as if sure of reading there, if a sentence, with it absolution.

"You will marry Valerian," Stephana repeated, as she spoke feeling the thrill of dismay that ran through Arthura's frame.

"Listen to me," Stephana said, using all the fascinations she was mistress of, compelling Arthura to look into the

depths of her persuasive eyes. "Valerian would fain make reparation. Will you not let him do so?"

"We should hate each other. Life would be intolerable to both of us."

"Hear me out," Stephana interposed, gently; "and when you have heard to the end you will see that I am right, and that you are wrong. Valerian was never in the spirit, only in the letter, unfaithful to you, and for such unfaithfulness I was greatly to blame. I never for a moment dreamed that he might be in love when I acceded to a request made years before he knew you. There was weakness, duplicity, in Valerian's behavior, if you will, but not changeableness. He never loved any woman but yourself. Our marriage was to have been of friendship only. Think for a moment on the various motives that may actuate a man with which love has nothing to do. Valerian had his way to make in the world. There were many reasons why, at that juncture in his affairs, he could not openly go against my wishes. His very love for you drove him into double-dealing. He wanted to secure my good-will—which meant worldly fortune—just because he loved you and wanted to marry you."

Arthura listened, unconvinced. Stephana went on, more encouragingly still: "I have seen Valerian. He has poured out his heart to me as brother to sister. And here he must be true, since every word is proved by his deeds. It is in my heart, not yours, that resentment should exist, since he made use of my kindly feelings toward him in order to serve his own purpose. I have no rancor. He never cared for me at all except as a possible benefactress. I shall always be as ready to help him as I have been."

Then she added, with a generous glow on her pale cheeks:

"You must marry him, dear Arthura, if you have any heart and soul at all. All is now made up between him and his mother. He will some day inherit her enormous wealth. But the only value it can have in his eyes now is the prospect of sharing it with you and yours," she said, smiling insinuatingly. "Think of it, Arthura! These little step brothers and sisters you love so dearly are to be made participators of Valerian's good fortune. He will act the part of father to them."

"Did he say so?" asked Arthura, with a childish expression of contentment.

"He did indeed. And there is another consideration which I think you will understand. Would you have Vale-

rian's wealth squandered as Miss Hermitage squanders hers? Will you not help him to use his fortune as a conscientious, high-minded man should do? You are not worldly, I know; you do not care to be rich."

"Ah!" Arthura said, the bright, audacious spirit re-asserting itself at last, "I see it all, Stephana. You are using wizardry. You will make me marry Valerian, and when we are rich you will make us do exactly with his money as you like."

"Would you mind that?" Stephana asked, playfully.

"Not if the children had new shoes when they wanted them, and there was never a baker's bill," rejoined Arthura. Under this new aspect of affairs cheerfulness seemed possible once more. Valerian, the benefactor of Benjamine and Walter and Baby, was suddenly transformed into a bearable person!

CHAPTER XLVII.

ALL that a penitent lover could say for himself Valerian said next day as he sat opposite the proud, listless Arthura. She had not at first a word to utter, but glanced at him, from time to time, with a timid, deprecatory look, much as if she were asking herself whether indeed he could ever become again the Valerian of old to her. It was not till Valerian began to dilate upon the children that Arthura realized the future he was building up was to be her future as well.

She even smiled as he spoke of Walter's prospects—how the high-spirited boy should be made a naval cadet, and have the dearest wish of his young heart realized, and he should be a gallant sailor. Then he talked of Benjamine and Baby. They should have as much money spent upon their education as she desired; a dowry should be assigned to each. Nor was Steppie forgotten. Her small means should be enlarged. She should have more change, more country air, and no pinching, no bills. Then, when lover-like eloquence had done its utmost, and he also sat silent and listless, she asked, very plaintively,

"Will you be good to me?"

What a rebuke these artless words conveyed to Valerian's mind! They revealed to him all that he had lost, all that must so painfully be regained as, step by step, and little by

little, he might perhaps, in some remote future, win back that generous, trusting affection.

There seemed nothing more to say; but how much he knew remained to do! To *Arthura* was assigned the hard task of forgiving bitter wrong; to *Valerian* one harder still. For forgiveness is oftentimes accorded in a day, an hour; but the reparation for wrong-doing is the up-hill toil of years.

"Take me to see *Miss Hermitage*," said *Arthura*, on a sudden; and *Valerian* drove her back at once, and left the pair together. He knew well what she had to say to his mother.

"My dear *Arthura*!" cried *Miss Hermitage*, for so she was called still—the secret of a life-time was to accompany her to the grave—"I am very glad to see you, now that you have recovered your spirits;" and with some surprise though no rebuke she let the girl clasp her round the waist and kiss her again and again.

"Dear, dear *Gossip*! I did want to say something to you. It was very wrong of me to deceive you about *Valerian*—"

"Talk of something more entertaining, my dear," said *Miss Hermitage*, characteristically. "I hate disagreeables. When you are married to *Valerian* you must live next door to me, you know. I must be amused. Why are there so many dull people in the world?"

"A world full of dunces is better than a world full of demons, anyhow," said *Arthura*.

Miss Hermitage laughed.

"Always an unexpected answer from you; and most people say exactly what you expect. It is so wearisome! Why do they do it?" she said, querulously. "Why so dull?"

"Because people are not made to order, I suppose."

"Ah," laughed *Miss Hermitage* again. "I am not overfond of my cousin *Constantine*. We two have quarreled like cat and dog all our lives. But I would give ten thousand pounds this moment to make him ten years younger. He is so unexpected!"

Arthura's fingers still toyed with *Miss Hermitage's* elegant ruffles, faultless head-gear, and small hands, on which sparkled diamond rings.

"I wish I were like you!" cried the girl, forgetting for the moment all about *Valerian*, only recalled to the humorous side of the old life with him under their patroness's roof. "So neat," she went on; "so exquisite, so perfect to look at! You will let me dress you for grand occasions, as I used to do, won't you?"

"Well," Miss Hermitage said, good-naturedly, "I suppose the next fine clothes I have to buy will be for Valerian's wedding. You will do him credit, my dear, and I can not see why you two should not get on together without scratching each other's eyes out. I hope you don't expect more. But Stephana, now, she will change her mind a dozen times. An angel from heaven would not satisfy *her!* And I know well enough Stephana's machinations," Miss Hermitage added wickedly. "When I am gone she will make Valerian play philanthropic ducks and drakes with my money. She is bent upon that. Well, it won't matter to me. The world may wag as it pleases when I am in my grave."

"Don't talk of your grave, Gossip," Arthura said, kissing the neat, ivory-complexioned cheek.

"Why, what does it concern you where I am?" Miss Hermitage said, with her little cynical laugh. "It is impossible you can care about me." Arthura looked shocked. "I always love people who are kind to me," she said, with a flushed face and tears in her eyes.

"Had you not better go and talk to Colette?" said Miss Hermitage, growing uncomfortable. "She is dying to see you. But don't make her cry."

"Was Mademoiselle Colette in love with Valerian, then?" asked Arthura, again mischievous.

"How preposterous you are! But you know Colette always sheds tears when she hears of marriages. She is so sentimental."

True enough, when the warm-hearted little Frenchwoman had received Arthura's palinode she did burst into a fit of weeping.

"You will love each other dearly, won't you?" she murmured as she shed tears of joy—"like Ursula and John Halifax, in my favorite novel. Won't you, now? Christina says it is all twaddle-dee-dum and twaddle-dum-dee. But I am sure I am right and she is wrong. How can two people help being fond and happy when they have taken each other for richer for poorer, for better for worse?"

"I don't see that it follows," answered Arthura.

"But how beautiful it sounds!" went on Colette. "'To have and to hold, in sickness and health.' You will be like Ursula, won't you? And if Valerian is not precisely a John Halifax, you will try to make him so?"

"I won't promise till I have read the book," Arthura

made reply. She was not addicted to the circulating libraries.

"Humph!" said Mr. Constantine, when the news was conveyed to him. "As usual! The unexpected about to happen, the unlooked-for brought about! Well, women must fall in love and fall out of it. Men must take to themselves wives and sit for the inevitable unflattering portrait. But really, now, my Prospera matched with Mr. Pliable, and my beautiful Mystic with any of mortal kind! 'Tis past all bearing. Why is love ever a will-o'-the-wisp, leading into quagmires? But we wise heads may prate. No one listens to us. The wise marriages are still made in heaven—the whole history of woman is summed up in the tale of Titania and the ass's head. There must be a compensation somewhere, if we could but find it out."

Steppie, of course, had her comments. "Oh dear! oh dear!" she cried, between laughing and crying. "I could dance for joy, although my heart is as heavy as lead. Stephana happy, Arthura happy! The poor children provided for. No more bills! Every one happy but poor me. And I am happy, if I could but know it. But I never shall know it—never, never!"

THE END.

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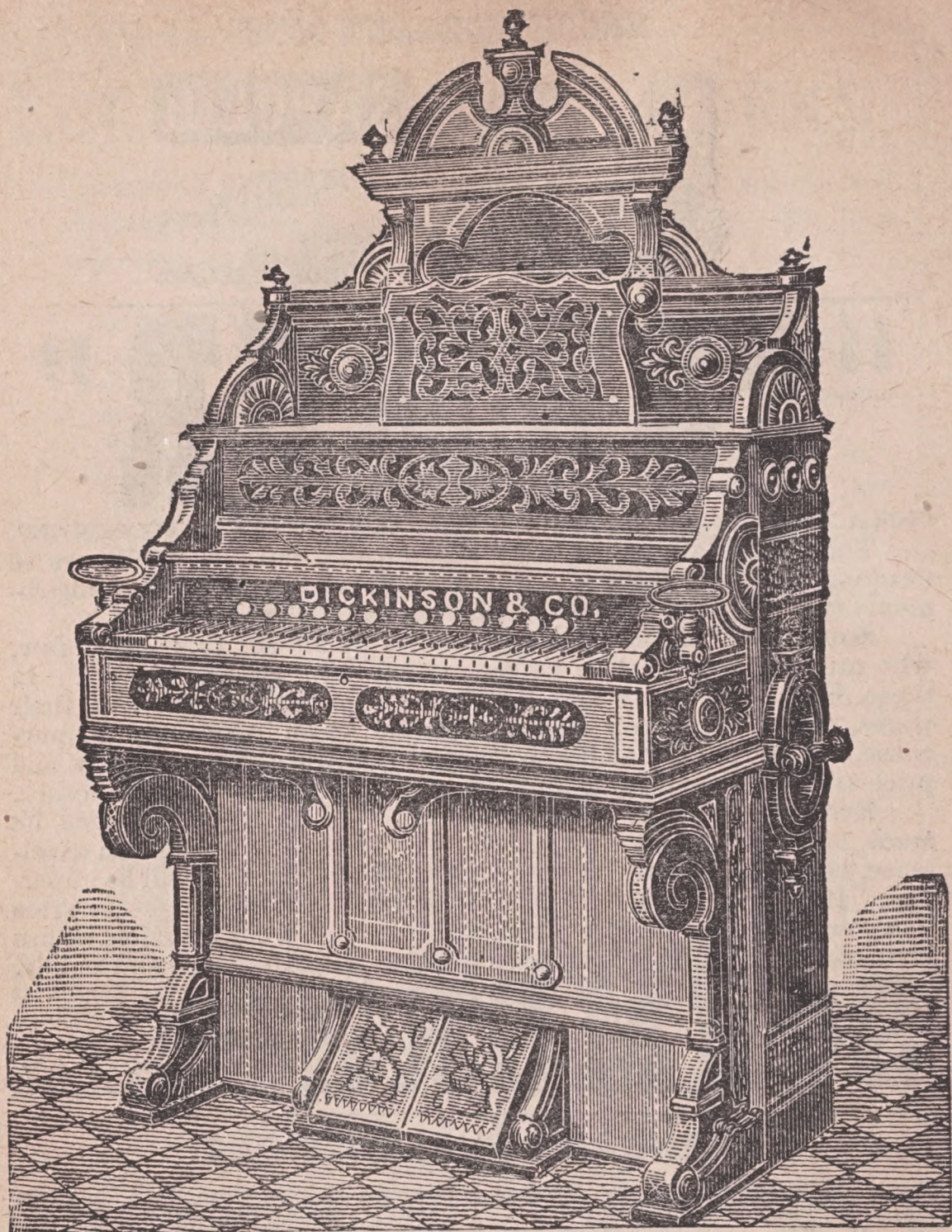
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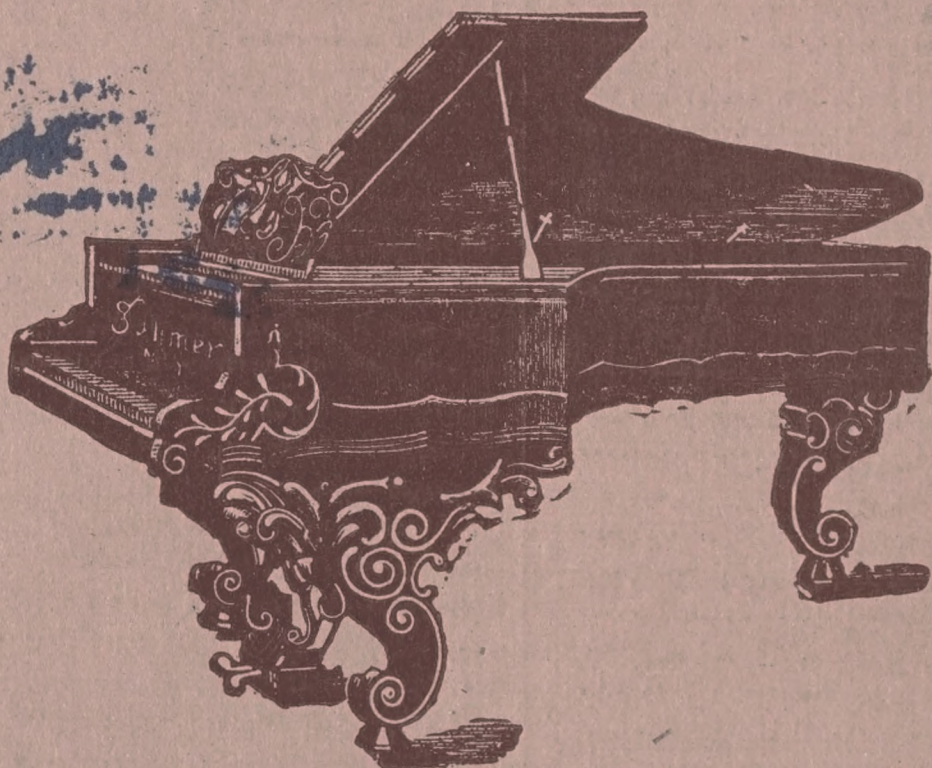
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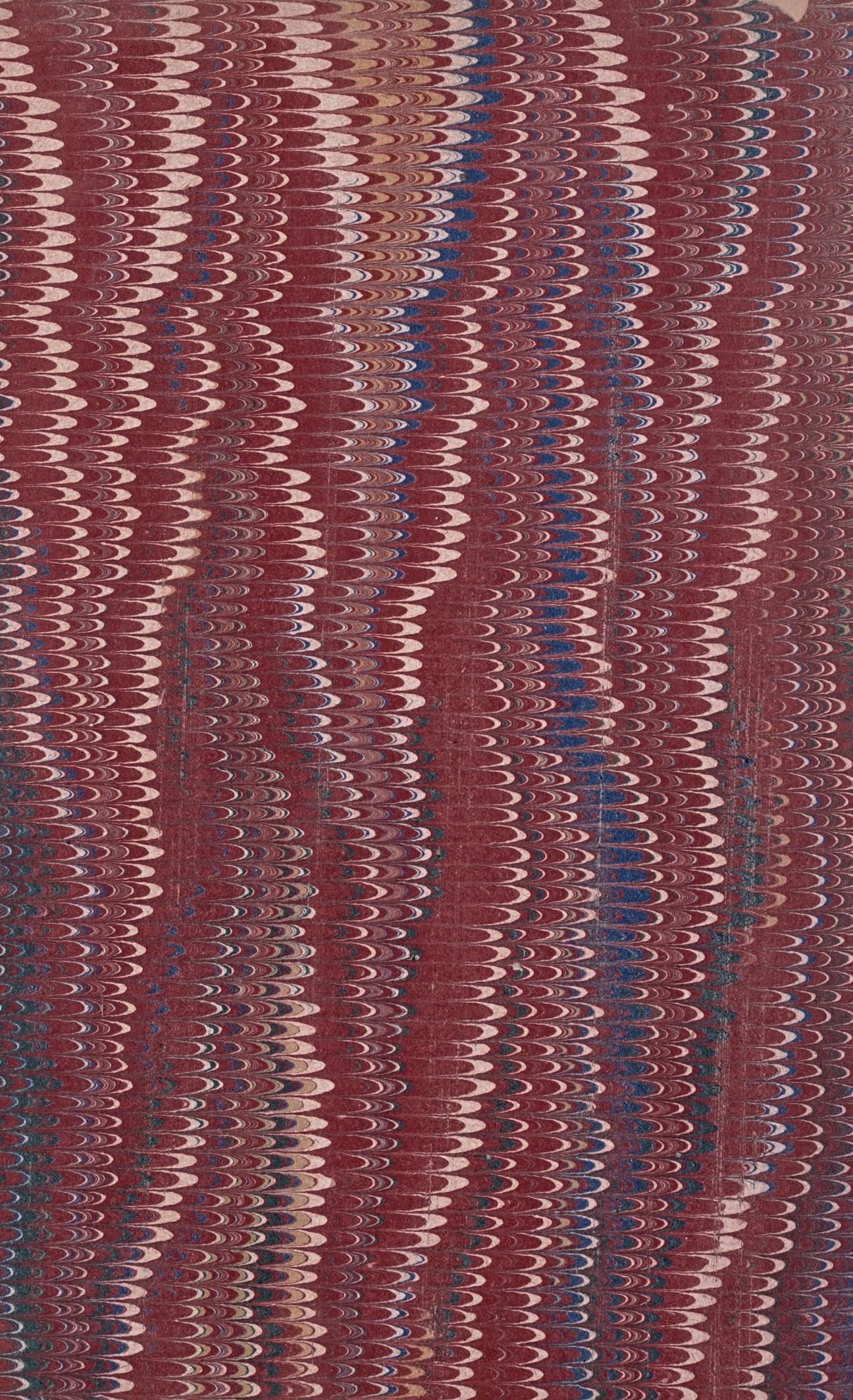
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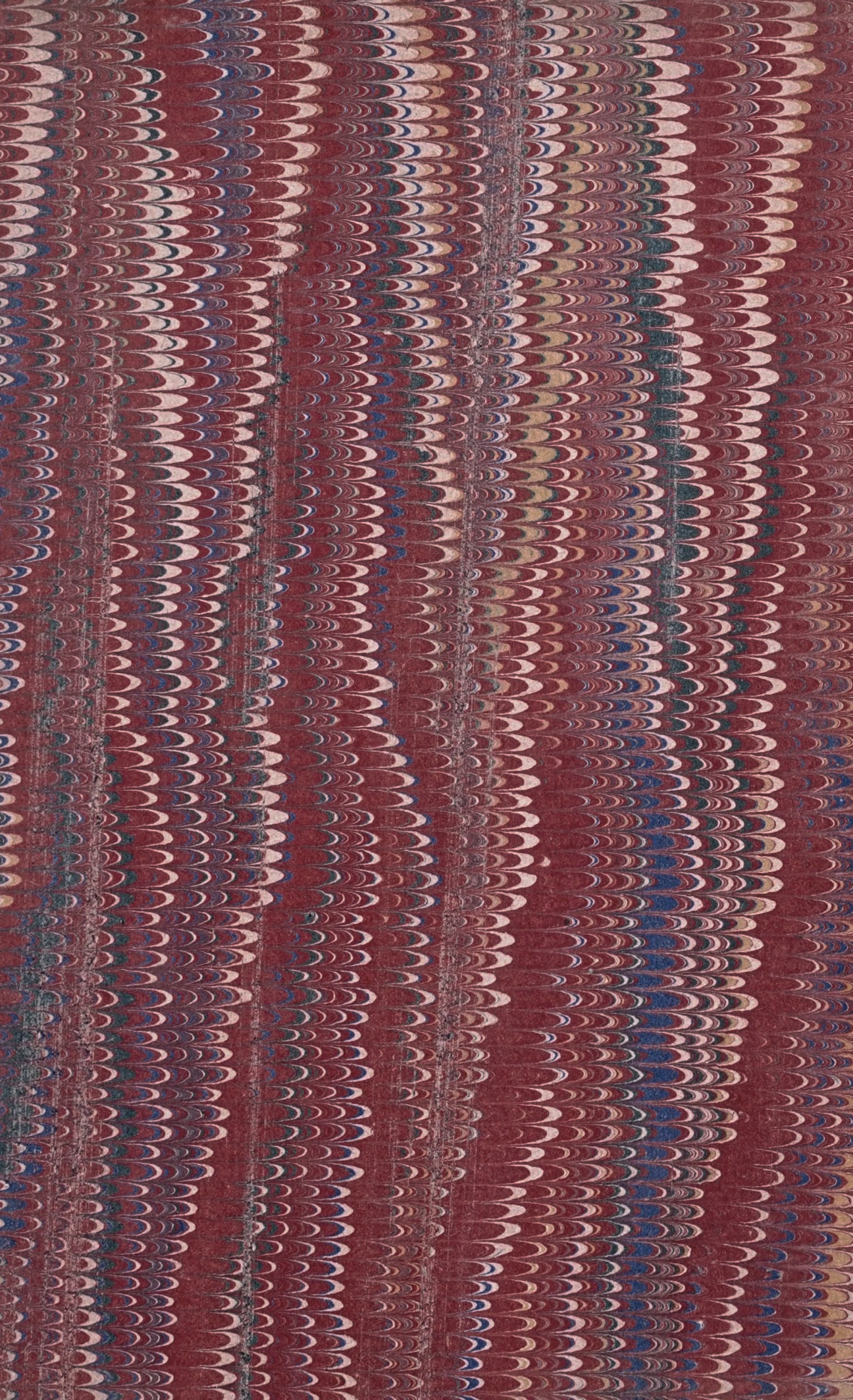
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